FLORENCE McNEIL AND PAT LOWTHER

Sean Ryan

A GREAT DEAL of what passes for literary criticism or assessment of who the important writers of any period are is simply accidental, the result of whim, conceit, puffery, self-aggrandizement, greed, private malice, in-group games, and sometimes simply stupidity.

Roy MacSkimming in a recent review in *Books in Canada* (November 1974) compared the rating game to championship boxing, said "sometimes in Canada it seems as if we *do* rank our poets with all those symbols of recognition in the form of junior and senior grants, writer-in-residence-ships and invitations to represent the country abroad — ."

Despite the playfulness of MacSkimming's metaphor, there is an element of truth in his observations. One reviewer recently referred to Susan Musgrave as "perhaps our next major poet." The situation of hankering for novelty, new faces, new voices is oddly reminiscent of the ballyhoos surrounding press agentry and rock stars or new models of automobiles.

The situation needs no further comment. Literary history of the past with all its mistakes, its constant revisionism, its incessant reassessing should give us hope. Always, beneath the ballyhoo there is a striving, a work going on, poets working to create the cultural nexus, the imaginative web which connects us to our country's invisible life: to the rich past and the promising future.

Possibly you have in mind right now poets who would, you think, qualify for this role. The poets you wish I would have talked about. I speak here only of two poets who have produced a substantial body of work, work of an impressive maturity.

When I wrote the following pages I meant to do only a work in progress report. Since then, Pat Lowther's tragic death has made my hopeful anticipations seem banal and grotesque. But what I perceived in her work, as well as in McNeil's, was a sharp scalpel-like probing, a daring to go into the depths of personal perceptions, and a corresponding ability to render those perceptions in hard honest unflinching terms. Her work endures.

And so I would like to begin with the poetry of Pat Lowther, only because I encountered it first. Her first book was *This Difficult Flowring*, published by

Very Stone House in 1968. In a review of it in *Canadian Forum,* Len Gasparini said: "Christ! I've never read poetry like this by a woman! Her poetry offers no easy exits for tailor made sensibilities."

One can see in this first book all the major themes and preoccupations which were to be constant in her work: an existential sense of the human condition which is expressed in personal lyrics about love and childbirth, and poems with a larger context, i.e., politics, as in her poems to Pablo Neruda, himself a poet, a socialist, a politician, and a humanitarian. One finds in her work also a pervasive sense of the timeless world of geology, the world which existed before the intrusion of human consciousness, and the worlds outside our limited perceptions, the reaches of intergalactic space. Most recently, this interest found expression in a multi-media creation commissioned by the MacMillan Planetarium in Vancouver: *Infinite Mirror Trip*, poems, slides and music presented in conjunction with the Planetarium's star show in August of 1974.

On the subject of the new consciousness of the woman revolution, she said in the anthology *Mountain Moving Day* (edited by Elaine Gill, The Crossing Press, 1973):

> (it is) part of a new outreach of consciousness . . . at one time I believed we humans were coming to the end of our evolutionary cycle — devolving like dandelions. Now I see the half-breeds of the future passing like migrating birds, and I begin to have a kind of hope. Maybe they'll find some clear space for consciousness, for going on. Not that I wholly trust them to be right. It is too easy to be wrong when you've grown in a culture that functions basically by mind manipulation. Maybe we have to go through the whole trial and error thing again. After all, thats how we got here in the first place.

Thus we see how all her concerns intermesh, the evolutionary process in time, human intervention into this process with the innovation of self reflection, of frontal lobe manipulation, the biological traps, an inevitable moving into a corner and yet the rising out of those traps or roles through the very instrument of imprisonment: consciousness. In "Doing it Over" a poem in Dorothy Livesay's anthology *Womans Eye* (Air Press, Vancouver, 1974) Lowther says:

> Once we've had babies
> we cant stop
> all our lives swelling and germinating
> in our dreams we may
> be more like plants
> than we thought
> apple trees cant
> forget the seasons
> nor can we ever be done with newness
> but make beginnings
> over and over again

in the roots of ourselves
in the dark
between our days

For her, politics is not, as it is for Atwood, a metaphor for individual power game strategies; politics is the real world of the possible, where human concerns larger than the interpersonal might be acted out. In her most quoted line, from *The Age of the Bird* (a poem sequence to Pablo Neruda, done in broadside format in a limited edition by Blackfish Press in 1972), she says:

Often now I forget
how to make love
but I think I am ready
to learn politics

In this series of poems, *The Age of The Bird* the image of the bird is emblematic of what stage in the evolutionary process immediately after the reptilian age, just on the brink of the time of mammals and the coming of man, in her poem "Woman" she says, "I think I wanted to be wings, the essence of wings." Neruda is a magician, performing the function of shaman, making the dreams of the people, and even in death, a continuing source of unity.

Always on earth was your substance
grain, ores and bones
elements folded in power
humans patient in time, and weather
now you too live with skeletons
heaped about you
our small perfect hands
touch you for comfort

The poems employ a religious, chant-like rhythm, creating a tone of responsorial ritual:

They have killed you with bullets
for that you were not
gold and silver
they have even given away your life, for that you
came in hair
and mud and giant flesh
they have cut off your fingers
for that you took
no attitude of prayer
before the male and female mountains

In *Milk Stone* (Borealis Press, 1974) ("Milk" is a verb in this title, according to the author), the long ambitious poem "In the Continent Behind my Eyes" creates an interior cinemascope of the whole evolutionary process beginning with

a present urban scene and spiraling back into prehistory. It merges the archetypal and the personal in a blend of reality, hallucination and dress which approximates the form of a speeded-up film. The theme is the intrusion of human consciousness into blind time, the interruption of eons of indifference by the coming of the human race.

There is a constant process of interrelating the self living in a here and now world with past selves, with birds again, so we are right back there at the moment on the evolutionary scale just after the death of the reptiles, and the cave bears whose claw marks on the walls of their caves may have taught our ancestors the rudiments of painting. The cave bears passed from the evolutionary process before we came. Yet we may have picked up where they left off — we may have learned from them. They are still in us.

In this poem Lowther creates a sense of being one with the landscape, of being in simultaneous time, as in James Dickey's work there is a constant awareness of a primitive self within, dormant, but alive. She celebrates the essentially human, but constantly places it in the context of the elemental. Art, the making of poems, as in Dickey's poem "The Eyebeaters," is a crying out, an attempt to posit meaning in a dark painfilled world.

"In the continent behind my eyes," she begins, "voices are pretending to be birds." Then the "City like an open brain zaps messages" and she is plunged into a vortex of accelerating images of stalagmites and leaf mouths and silver fur hands the postures of hunters and the city is a concrete flower we grew. Into this sudden merging of the self into geologic time, she questions when it was and what it was that "invited us out of our bodies to make a world web in time to build on the rock Death."

This ultimate pain of consciousness, of a sense of loss, yet a feeling of communion with the archetypal memories of past selves finds final expression in "the sea I had forgotten to account for the first metaphor, its endless business even now the sea is inventing sex and death." And then

> in the spring water seemed
> full of voices
> whose words we had forgotten
> we gave each other names
> we found the cave he died in
> water ran down the wall. . . .
> I create every possible existence
> while behind me might
> erases beginnings
> my fingers trace
> his gouges on the wall
> soon I will take a sharp stick
> and begin

As Peter Stevens said in a review of *Milk Stone* (*Globe and Mail*, March 1, 1975) "What *Milk Stone* offers is a considered reaching out towards untold possibilities for man and woman once both recognize the potentialities within themselves in their relation to an expanding universe. What shines through in this volume is the clear direct sight of a singing woman, working out her own responsibilities beyond the limits set by society. It is a clear eyed and firm poetry full of singing."

A Stone Diary (Oxford, 1977), prepared for press before her death and published posthumously, is a coalescing and consolidation of these recurring strategies and concerns. The central shaping image is still stone:

> By the turn of the week
> I was madly in love
> with stone . . .
>
> . . . the stones shine
> with their own light,
> they grow smoother
> and smoother

There are more letters to Pablo Neruda, more poems about the agony of human existence, evanescent and fragile as it is compared to the "silence between" separate human lives lived in isolation — from self, from others, from the eternal galactic universe, which is known only from contact with the surviving stones. How will we survive?

Some reviewers have read this final work as ironic and prophetic of her death. A more judicious reading will see the poems as statements of affirmation, quietly spelling out her resilient will, saying words to scatter the dark.

FLORENCE MCNEIL also has a strong sense of the presence of time in our existence. However, unlike Lowther, whose chief concerns are with prehistoric time, the timeless world of galaxies and silent stones, McNeil exhibits wonder over the artifacts of human history. In "Indian Artifacts" she says:

> It was peaceful on the beach trail
> their persian cat cleaning the pearl ruff
> till the motorcycle and the cat collided
> and fur and bones invited by
> hypnotic chrome
> and when the motorcycle apologized
> and left
> and the fur stopped moving
> we walked to the Indian banks
> and spent the day digging

without luck
for evidence of another civilization

In poems like "1915 Fighting Plane" and "Art Nouveau" as well as "1902 Talking Machine" she places old photographs and advertisements next to our own position; for instance in "1915 Fighting Plane" she speaks of the fear

that this pilot buried at first
in elite silence
has come to share his not so private graveyard
with innocent thousands who never looked up
to applaud
his comic heroics

and "Art Nouveau" contrasts the old ads for cigarettes where a soldier home on leave

contemplates with delight
the arabesque of smoke
refined from his cigarette

and stands by "patriotic pianos" while his loved one reveals an ankle in iridescent moonlight and tends curling roses

which point
imprecisely
down the long long trail

and elsewhere in the

last half of the magazine
there are photographs
blurred and unreal, and stiff geometric legs of dead horses
the abstract confusion of ordinary arms
and barbed wire
are reproduced poorly
and clarify nothing

She exhibits the same strong sense of place and time in *Walhachin* (Fiddlehead, 1971) a series of poems which are, in the style of her Emily Carr poems, the thoughts of someone from the past. In *Walhachin* it is the imagined monologue of an Englishwoman who came, in 1907, with a group of settlers from England to colonize the area of Walhachin, near the Thompson River in British Columbia's dry belt. Irrigation flutes were built and a town began to grow. Trees began to grow. By 1914, things were looking promising. But then the First World War intruded and most of the men were called out, a heavy rainstorm wiped out most of the flutes, most of the men did not return and the project was abandoned. The sage grew again, and it is again a desert, but there are some dead trees still to be seen there.

"this landscape is incomprehensible" the woman thinks

have lost time
in the canyon a jackrabbit runs away
from my unhappiness
the whistling sage sends out messages
I cannot follow

and finally:

1914
Wandering in August
through the trees
confirming to patterns
we set out

I can hear already
the troop train exploding
through the dry plateau
whose moon has followed me
and blown itself up against a whole sky
there are banners in the country
whose decisions
uproot out our own
because we have nudged uneasy canyons
into compromise
because the long days of killing sage
have ended in this temporary outburst
we are no less British
the small grass bayonets my shoes
there are dreadnoughts at anchor in the Thompson.

Her third book, *The Rim of the Park* (Sono Nis, 1971) is a collection of artifacts, snapshots, tableaus, documents, vigils, nightwatches, things looked at so closely and with so cool and detached an eye that the reader does not notice that the friendly guide, chatting amiably, is taking him further into the park, far from the safe rim, the civilized outside, and closer to that "dark zoo" in the centre. This is no mere collection, it is a collision.

McNeil is obviously fascinated by the art of photography, and many of her poems use it as a metaphor. Moreover, her own art, her working with words strives to the same end; fixing in a final light the transitory moment in flight, fixing things in a past space, freezing the last gestures of dead men. In "Posing for a Picture": she protests the staginess of role playing and posing:

I would like you to move me off the moutains love
out of the sky

and in "Silents" she pays tribute to the "popcorn sunset" of a film past, as well as photography itself in "Photography":

Fuzzed into
Quadruple exposure

It is this same sense of wonder for time's erosive force that one senses in the "tourist" poems: "Unchartered Canada" which catalogues "scenic values," and "Arrival and Departure" which is the best poem I have yet seen about those monuments to the age of steam and iron, the railway stations, where one

hears from the vaulted dome standard time
in roman numerals;

poems like "The Hotel, Frank Alberta," "Banff," "A tavern in Sunburst, Montana," "The Old Indian Church," "Seaside Restaurant" and epiphanies in the old Joycean sense, an instant widening of sensibility, an opening and bright disclosure.

Again the world of lost childhood cartoons and the funnies

I was away a long time
the balloon over my head said
("Homecoming")

the scratchy, faint voices of the past ("1902 Talking Machine") and childhood toys ("the dead tin soldiers" and "biplane royalty" in Chivalry) and art ("In Courbets paintings the arresting quiet/ of the mid-Victorians" ["Burial at Armans"] and "Roualt's black figures/ are outsides" ["Miserere"]) are attempts to fix the fleeting moment to lose, to incorporate, absorb, assimilate, pin down.

But paradoxically, when we are led through the world of these poems, a kind of sinister museum, where the eyes of the stuffed birds glitter with ambiguous intent, we cannot stay in the moving immediate world on its edges. McNeil forces the family album onto our laps and open to see the grinning skulls behind the placid faces of that long ago picnic.

For all her machinery of a world of perceived things, photographic evidence, vistas noted and catalogued, her deepest concern is with the living, the sad inheritors of this blandly smiling, impervious, obdurate presence of the past. The inheritors are surrounded by dead men and women; when they speak, their ancestors chorus. They are never alone. Out for a Sunday stroll, they are destined to be mugged by long dead cousins. The dark zoo waits at the chill end of a Sunday afternoon. It is always four in the afternoon and almost closing time.

I do not mean to suggest that these poems are morbid, down or depressing. Quite the contrary, Florence McNeil suffuses this world with a tender light, touching the awkward past with a gentle wonder, without flinching, as she is no sentimentalist.

In poems like "Elegy" and "Cemetery Visit," she breaks into a frozen inward sea, facing it with brave words. Louis Zukofsy once said of poetry that "the words must live, not merely seem to glance at a watch." Florence McNeil's words bleed.

McNeil's strong sense of the presence of the past in the present is further explored in *Ghost Towns* (McClelland and Stewart, 1975). The same sense of synchronistic existence in a world which isn't exactly ours, peopled as it is with ghosts, is entrenched in these latest poems.

She moves from early pioneers of the air (Montgolfier, Lilienthal, Bleriot) to movies and photographs ("reruns on the return of tom mix," "newsreel", "art nouveau") childhood memories ("first dive," "domestic alice," "west coast christmas"), to a tangible present ("Skating," "having said love").

There can, of course, be no final word on the work of these two writers. I hoped to avoid falling into the same trap I began with, touting the "next major poet" or the next champion. Their work is here and available. Perhaps one day we can catch up with it.

QUESTION

Elizabeth Gourlay

"Who are you, Elizabeth?
I ask myself
encased in this steel cabin
drinking white rum and soda
at an altitude
32,000 feet . . .
beneath me
a mattress of white clouds
very soft they look
but I am continually cognisant
they would not hold me
up
every so often the clouds part and
I peer down into a frozen
landscape
brittle ice covering
curlecued lakes
small trees a haze
indecipherable
existence is incredible I think
looking at
these effervescent bubbles
exploding steadily
in the bottom of this crystal
cup.