

## *Drawing on Water. Wade Kearley; At First Light. Donald McGrath.*

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*At First Light*. Donald McGrath. Don Mills, ON: Wolsak and Wynn Pubs. Ltd., 84 p., softcover, 1995, \$12.00, ISBN 0-919897-44-4.

## MARNIE PARSONS

IN *AT FIRST LIGHT*, his first volume of poetry, Donald McGrath writes out of a crucial separation: the visceral memory of an earlier time and place, a profound distinction between home and "away," quietly underlines many of the poems in this book. But it strikes me that another more significant and potentially unfortunate separation operates here — one between author and reader. The book's cover might be read as an unwitting metaphor. The ghostly image of a headless person in a suit rowing what looks to be a punt, it's a piece done by McGrath himself and reproduced in black and white. The drawing anticipates the raising of a partially buried past, the chimeric vision of memory's half-light. It's a striking cover — especially so for me because it seems to render visually some of my reservations about the book.

My sense of writing is that it is a far more physical experience than many might credit. It certainly is physical for me; words and ideas slog through my body, lodge in my knees, gum up near the crook of my elbows before forcing their way out my finger tips and onto the page. So I am intrigued by this picture of an incomplete body. I find it telling, because McGrath's writing in this book doesn't strike me as "whole" or fully realized. Some of the poetry in *At First Light* is and is not "there,"

does and does not “imagine” how days, present and past, unfold. Inhabiting the complex emotion between absence and presence can either infuse writing with dynamic tension, energy that compels and clarifies, or make it ungainly and incomplete. In many of these poems, some quite lovely, McGrath works to accommodate betwixt-ness, to flesh out and re-invigorate memory. But there are moments when something feels out of synch. Something is missing. Not his head. McGrath’s head is, time and again, bodied forth in an acute eye and well-tuned ear. And it certainly isn’t his heart that is missing. What is lacking is a certainty, an ease of step that might make these poems leap.

Part of the ambiguity of presence which leaves me hesitant about some (but by no means all) of McGrath’s poems boils down to a lack of trust — in his reader, in his own words. Sometimes his speaker anticipates a failure of understanding like that in “Thoughts of Home”:

But another story begins to be told,  
that blank screen is, for me,  
an emblem of those others’ inability  
to imagine how my day  
must unfold, so far away, on the mainland.

Here physical separation from loved ones is complicated by an intellectual distance, a fading of compassionate imagination. The speaker is overwhelmed by a sense of disjunction made worse by expectations of what others *cannot* know. Yet how can the often slant language of poetry even begin to make up for such unknowing? It’s unfair, perhaps, to zero in on these few lines, to make them emblematic of a slackness I sense in other, quite different poems, but they do illustrate my discomfort. For if these “others” are judged unable to imagine, might not a poet who craves connection, reunion, feel compelled to imagine *for them*? To bridge unknowing rather than allow it to stand?

McGrath has a tendency to fill in. So strong seems his desire to overcome perceived imaginative inabilities (in his readers from away, if not loved ones back home) that he often undercuts himself. He says too much. Doing so, providing too much interpretation, too much description, too many adjectives, cueing a reader about how or what she should see, he creates a paradoxical distance, an absence. He shuts his reader out of the very sensual and intellectual participation he seems to want to encourage. He is so intent on making the worlds of Branch and Placentia Bay, or of urban Montréal, real, that he usurps the reader’s responsibility to participate in the realization of those worlds.

“The Pail” is one of the more obvious examples of this problematical over-saying:

The night the handle came off the pail  
we all ran to the foot of the stairs  
just in time to see the unmentionable tide  
slide, dark and lumpy, under the Christmas tree.

My mother screamed, pushed us all back out.  
The shame was too much, germs were dangerous.  
Above, the miniature angel remained serene.  
Her smile meant Heaven would have real toilets.

The poem begins with an imagistic strength and phonic resonance which are by no means unusual in this book. McGrath's echoing and reshaping of sounds ("pail" "all" "stairs"; "time" "tide" "slide") are quite lovely. His use of punctuation in the first stanza is very canny — the lines run on almost unhindered until the end of the first stanza, where the period, like the contents of "the pail," comes to rest at the foot of the Christmas tree. The only pauses in the first stanza set off "dark and lumpy" — the texture of the line clearly emphasizes that of the spilled offal. McGrath has given very little description apart from that offset phrase; we, now a collective that includes the reader, see for ourselves the glop at the base of the tree. We aren't told what it looks like, how much there is, how it rests against the trunk of the tree, its relation to the rest of the room. We are, in fact, told very little. And it is that economy which makes the moment vivid. This is smart and controlled writing. Everything works together to make that spill *happen* for a reader who takes the time to experience the lines fully, to read thoughtfully.

It's in the second stanza that the poem's energy begins to wane. The idea of opposing the reactions of the mother (a figure once deemed the "angel of the household") with those of the angel on the tree is wonderful. Handled with subtlety and grace, it could be inspired. But the break between stanzas somehow breaks McGrath's restraint. Suddenly he is playing the intermediary: This is what the mother thought, this is what the angel's smile meant. Readers are no longer embraced in that collective "we." Toilets in heaven, a reader is assured. Far better than streets of gold to those without indoor plumbing. But since the reader is no longer allowed inside the poem as co-equal, that gentle wit turns quaint and loses its impact.

I could point to many poems with similar glitches — "Turquoise Funk," for instance, which hangs on a lovely confusion of puns. McGrath is well aware of the distinctness of Newfoundland English, and doesn't want an uninformed reader left out, so he parenthetically defines the terms of his joke:

Two kinds of trunk (automobile, elephant)  
And two kinds of longer (one, *of time*, the other  
the "longers" my father cut for fences

and “spelled” out of the woods, his strong arms  
 curled up like trunks) — all this  
 sent my young mind four ways at once.

I love puns; used well, they dazzle. But elaborated to make sure a reader gets them, they dim. McGrath clarifies his point, but the price is the elasticity of his language and the sprightliness of his poem. A more assured hand might have worked those puns without diminishing their punch. A more trusting one might have risked sending his reader’s “mind four ways at once.”

It is rare for a stanza to undercut a McGrath poem entirely, though. More commonly, an unnecessary line, an extra phrase or two throws things slightly off-kilter. In “Neckties,” readers are directed this way:

until you sat down in that way  
 babies have of lowering their bottoms  
*that makes one think of those bottoms*  
*as pudgy feelers informing the whole baby* (my emphasis)

The delightful energy of the next line and the fine image it offers — “of weather conditions in the tropics of the floor” — are muted by the lines that precede it, by McGrath’s impulse to dilute. “Pudgy feelers”? “Tropics of the floor”? Yes, absolutely! But the success of these phrases is compromised because McGrath sets the reader at a remove, explaining that tentative bottoming. I want to *feel* and *see* that movement myself, through the movement of the poem’s language. I crave interaction, not interpretation.

If I seem to overstate my reservations, it is only because, as I read *At First Light*, I feel so strongly what this book might have been with more rigorous editing, more restraint. McGrath has a lovely sense of place, an acute sense of detail; he isolates moments tellingly. It could be argued that his vision of Newfoundland is nostalgic, but nostalgia well-cut and refined, nostalgia with an edge can be marvelous. Some of his poems offer wryly ironic insights. “Property of the Empire,” my favourite in the volume, is a model of economy and edge:

In the outport when my mother was a girl  
 bread was baked with Crown Brand flour.  
 This was so all-purpose that the sacks  
 were sewn into pants for the men.  
 Successive bleachings barely managed to fade  
 the imperial crowns stamped on the material.  
 Walking around with faded crowns on their arses  
 our grandfathers were, O yes, property of the Empire.

This is what McGrath can do. Traces of such style and wit are found in almost every poem in the book. Unfortunately, few sustain that wit and style throughout as beautifully as “Property” does. McGrath is a poet with considerable promise, but *At First Light* doesn’t fully realize that potential. This could have been a very good book. Instead, it is enjoyable but patchy. Reading it, I sense the ghosts of the poems that aren’t here, poems inside the poems on the page that paring, realigning, ever-so-slight adjustments might uncover. Sensing and lamenting them.

*Drawing on Water*, Wade Kearley’s first book of poetry, didn’t leave me longing for poems that were never quite realized. His voice is stronger, more assured than McGrath’s, despite its awkwardnesses. Kearley is working closer to his capacity, although I’d hesitate to suggest that his potential exceeds McGrath’s. Unlike much of *At First Light*, *Drawing on Water* is not predominantly a reflection on the Newfoundland of Kearley’s childhood, although there are some poems of his youth here. Newfoundland does permeate the book, as setting, as air — it is breathed and walked. Signal Hill, Quidi Vidi Lake, the Basilica (“an iceberg on the rising tide of houses” — “On an almost empty Wednesday”), Duckworth Street, as well as the landscape of the interior, of Conception Bay and Manuels. When Newfoundland appears, it does so naturally rather than nostalgically, as part of the fabric of a life lived rather than recalled. That relationship with the place affects the style of the poetry as well as its content and atmosphere. Kearley doesn’t suffer from the need to over-say, to explain to his reader what or how the place is, because for him it is so strongly present. It doesn’t need to be re-evoked or to be wrestled dramatically to the fore. Even poems of his childhood, then, are more restrained than McGrath’s; “New founde man,” for instance, ends:

I left her in the bright smoke,  
asked my sixteen year-old self  
why I had no friends, then  
got laid behind the parish hall  
and never looked back since.

Except for that last, unnecessary word, the poem is economical and quite smart. And the emphasis on not looking back, not mourning the lost self or time past, allows Kearley to remember with honesty and toughness.

The book’s epigraph, from Northrop Frye, establishes one element against which the whole can be read: “We are all underwater.” Water is a motif, deluge and storm are continually revisited in *Drawing on Water*. Kearley draws on water as source. Its presence is as strong, if not stronger, than that of Newfoundland as place. Yet it is not the sole focus of the book; its relationship to many of these poems is tangential, metaphorical, at best. Being underwater for Kearley is being overwhelmed by the fullness and the difficulties of living. So his subject matter ranges widely, through sexual awakening, family tensions and joys, writing as a craft and

as a life, hunting, the experience of landscape and animal lives, and the loss of a loved one, of a home. To almost every topic he brings thoughtful observation, a studied (perhaps too studied) sense of craft and an immediacy of emotion.

The cover art by Janice Udell, depicting a water or wine jug on a tumbled cloth that echoes the movement of the ocean surf or storm clouds visible through an arched castle window, combines still life and vigorous motion; the image opposes calm interior and stormy exterior, culture and nature, light and shadow, suggesting resonant similarities within seeming opposites. The blend produces, in Kearley's poetry, an intriguing, often successful, mix of artifice and raw intensity. Often successful, but not always. There are times when his attempts to "[merge] classical and modern poetic forms," as the cover note puts it, fall flat. Sometimes he disrupts the flow of his poems with self-consciously poetic gestures, nods to classical forms and models which strike my ear as unlikely, as less rigorous and raw than much of the volume. If *Drawing on Water* has moments of unnaturalness, they are the result not of trying to recall a distant past, but of trying to resurrect a poetic past. Of course, poetic forms are never truly obsolete, even if they do fall out of fashion. Current experiments in highly formal poetry, like P.K. Page's glosas in *Hologram*, show how flexible and lithe such complexity can be. Kearley seems less drawn to the forms themselves, however, than to certain elements of formality in diction, tone, imagery and atmosphere. These too have their place and can be refreshed, but Kearley doesn't always handle them as effortlessly as one might wish.

"Lycidas," Kearley's elegy for a drowned friend, for example, is a finely wrought, deeply felt poem; yet it doesn't always comfortably embrace its literary predecessor, Milton's magnificent elegy for *his* drowned friend, Edward King. The allusion of the title, and the accidents of circumstance are enough to hold the two poems together; borrowing Milton's title, Kearley cues the reader to the form, tone, and even, as it turns out, the signal event of the poem. He borrows images from Milton as well, and sometimes uses them in substantially different ways. Milton's speaker begins his lamentation regretting that he must pluck the berries of the laurel, ivy and myrtle, plants with which poets were traditionally crowned, before plants and poet have matured. But pluck he must, to sing the death of a friend plucked before *his* time. Kearley reshapes the image of the berry considerably: "What a blind rude curse that such a ripened berry/ should be plucked and crushed unwise." These are not the berries of the laurel, nor are they associated with poetry. Kearley's berry is his dead friend, ripe with promise and the fullness of life. That shift is important; elements of Milton's elegy are used with freedom and assurance rather than rigidity. Kearley may borrow images, but he makes them his own.

Other traditional images are also infused with freshness and immediacy. Consider the sorrow palpable in these lines: "I play though my hands feel thick on the strings./ His memory blisters my finger tips." That last line is especially lovely. Sorrow, here and elsewhere, is a pervasive heaviness, physical as well as emotional and psychological. Although guitar strings may well be what the speaker refers to

(the instrument is never named), I read these thinking of a lyre. What impresses me about much of this poem is emotional rawness and integrity (“I carried my sorrow like cold sweat”) as a modern poem, with a modern context, is made to resonate with elements of a genre centuries, millennia, old. Many of these ancient conventions are integrated into the poem with naturalness and grace.

But not all, and not consistently. Kearley can often achieve a stateliness, an ease of formality in tone that is quite lovely because he arrives at it by blending contemporary and conventional languages and images. But there are times when his borrowing of the diction or images of his precursors feels at odds with the rawness that I find so compelling in “Lycidas.” One small word can break the mood for me, as here:

In my mind I see you on the beach. But there you rise,  
brush off the sand, flick back your mane,

dash up the path with my clothes in your hand.

“Mane” strikes me as being out of synch. It isn’t arcane or pretentious; it’s common enough even in casual speech, though in this context the implicit metaphor is overly weighty. I realize that the leonine implications of the word pick up on an earlier reference to Lycidas’s “roar.” But one doesn’t “flick” a mane. As Don McKay suggests, poetry is a form of deep attention to language, and when I attend fully to Kearley’s language, try to breathe with it, I sometimes feel winded. I lose my attention, for example, at “flick” and “mane.” They torque the cleanness of the line, sound artificial in a poem whose success turns on the ability to naturalize a specific and profound experience of loss in an ancient form of lament.

There are other lines that jar — “I must pluck out the song. The gods in rebellion,/ the sun’s chariot smashed. My fingers burn,” for instance. The image of the “sun’s chariot,” appearing early in the poem, is high artifice; nothing that comes after it gives the image a context to bear it out. True, later the sun is again “smash[ing],” this time against “the stiffening limbs” of the speaker’s dead friend. But the image of the “chariot” remains foreign. Kearley does include other conventional references to “the gods” in the poem, exploring the chance nature of death and the uncertainty of the afterlife. But these references seem undigested, almost a shying *away* from the fullness of grief; at these points I feel as if he is bending his grief to the language of the form, rather than making the form accommodate his grief. I don’t mean that he should eschew such language; far from it. When he roots it in his experience, his poem sings true. When he does not, the pitch is less than perfect.

I write at length on “Lycidas” because it is such a fine example of both Kearley’s ability and of the hitches that sometimes unsettle me as I read him. There are moments of awkward poeticality in other poems, but there are also moments of



power. Kearley is capable of spareness and intensity, as in “There is a new land” and “Scavenger,” both polished and restrained. Capable, too, of tenderness and gentle sadness, as in “My father’s résumé” where the speaker takes stock of how his father takes stock of his own life:

... Your knuckles, cut and bruised on the edge  
of kitchens and laundry rooms. No mention of how you can tell

what people are like from the dirt behind their refrigerator.  
And what of your music and how you tortured your young family

with rosin and catgut. What about the woman who left you to your  
three young boys. Left you no time to paint. You emphasize

how companies drew on your skills until you went into business

Kearley’s speaker draws a moving psychological picture of this man by giving words, authority, to the very things his father leaves unsaid as unimportant. Doing so, he also subtly reveals some of the tangled complexities of his relationship with the man.

Kearley can turn an image to his purpose with grace and subtlety, as he does in this startling evocation of memory from “Of my kayak,” about

... the Eskimo roll of memories  
surfacing 20 years later  
without missing a breath or a stroke.

I love this image of the sudden flip through time that takes one unawares. It has an originality and a freshness that are beautifully maintained as times melt together in memory. The language here has a playful, metaphorical energy that enacts, rather than describes, the sudden dip of memory.

*Drawing on Water* is not a perfect book, but much of it is thoughtful and polished, and most of it is proof of Wade Kearley’s abilities. His sense of language and imagery is often fine, and his love of words and of poetry is palpable throughout. If he founders in places, it’s because he occasionally emulates rather than integrates, adopts rather than adapts, poetic formalities.