

[#18]

a C.S. GISCOMBE and BARRY MCKINNON
dialogue, along with timely responses to their
exchanges by WAYDE COMPTON, GEORGE
ELLIOTT CLARKE and GIOVANNI SINGLETON,
in addition to new poetry.

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PhillyTalks 18 (33 pages)

C. S. Giscombe / Barry McKinnon

responses by Wayde Compton, George Elliott Clarke, giovanni singleton

Friday Feb. 2nd, 7:30 pm Mountain Time (9:30 pm Eastern)

NB: The live component of *PhillyTalks* 18 will take place at the **Rozsa Centre, University of Calgary** (Alberta, Canada), not at its usual venue, Kelly Writers House, Philadelphia. To participate in the live audiocast of the event, sign-in at the main web page, www.phillytalks.org; 25 places are available on the server.

The Event

Cecil Giscombe and Barry McKinnon were invited to begin a dialogue on/across their work, for this newsletter and the “PhillyTalks” project. Poets Wayde Compton, George Elliott Clarke and giovanni singleton were then invited to respond to the fact of a Giscombe/McKinnon talk, and specifically to their exchange—they had about a week in which to formulate responses: *not* a lot of time.

The Poets

C.S. Giscombe’s recent book is the travelog, *Into and Out of Dislocation* (New York: North Point, 2000): “it’s an African-American archetype—culture occurs in landscape— and here I am, the first generation born across the Ohio River (and born, admittedly, bourgeois), still having the impulse, *north!*, though it’s metaphorized into something other than the sane set of reasons-for-migration that belonged to those who went earlier” (136). His recent poetry book is *Giscombe Road* (Normal, IL: Dalkey Archive, 1998); before that, *Here* (Dalkey, 1994), whose poems “move in intricately woven patterns (like the candid language of risky dreams) [...] post-personal yet not quite public” (Clarence Major). The poems featured in *PhillyTalks* 18 are from *Inland*, soon to appear from Leroy Books (San Francisco). He teaches at Penn State U, State College, Pennsylvania.

Barry McKinnon is author of *PulpLog* (Prince George, BC: Caitlin, 1991)—winner of the Dorothy Livesay poetry prize for that year and his first commercially available book since *The the*. (Toronto: Coach House, 1981). The latter was nominated for a Governor General’s award. His most recent book: *The Centre* (Caitlin, 1995); its last section, *Arrhythmia*, also won a prize, the bp Nichol Chapbook Award, 1994. Red Deer College Press re-issued his 1975 (limited-edition) book, *I Wanted to Say Something*, in 1990. McKinnon lives in Prince George, BC, publishes broadsides and books through his Gorse Street Press and teaches at the College of New Caledonia.

Wayde Compton (Vancouver) is author of *49th Parallel Psalms* (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp, 1999) and will be present. <http://www.sfu.ca/~wcompton>

George Elliott Clarke’s recent book is the verse-play, *Beatrice Chancy* (Victoria, BC: Polestar, 1999). The chapbook, *Gold Indigoes*, was published by Carolina Wren Press in 2000. He lives in Toronto.

giovanni singleton’s recent work can be found in *Chain*, *Five Fingers Review*, and *Kenning*. The chapbook, *mother/father*, was published by nocturnes editions in 1999. She lives in Berkeley.

Thanks to the Kelly Writers House at the University of Pennsylvania, for their continued support of *PhillyTalks*, and the University of Calgary English Department and Cultural Diversity Institute as well as The Canada Council for supporting #18 in particular – which is co-curated by Fred Wah, who initiated their reading and made their event financially possible to do as a “PhillyTalks” in Calgary. The newsletter has been placed on the web by Aaron Levy. Thanks to all.

-- Louis Cabri

C.S. Giscombe

from “Inland”¹

Favorite Haunt

Having lost the talent for driving and become, simply, “unavoidable,” I got to be an appearance at the center of things, a common apparition, neither heaven nor hell.

No consequences, but the continent itself: this is writing from experience, this is certainty past arrival, the flat center having become my favorite haunt. I got to be an image, an appearance in the literature. (It means the same thing really, being allowed to make appearances and over a long time becoming a fixture in the imagination of someplace, famous there in a manner of speaking.)

Appearance to whom?

Staying on around the place, continental, a neighborhood man, a favorite haunt (or a favored one), fixed, Lincoln-esque, a little happy. Simple, but lots of folks are simple.

The open set, the open return.

The 1200N Road, Going East

To me, image is any value in the exchange. Pleasure’s accidental. In any event, it’s hard to measure and harder still to memorize, pleasure. Image stands in. To me, voice is that which gets stuck in the head, effected voice, or inbetween the teeth, the hiss of love. Songs, eating. Whatever love says it’s no image, no consequence. This far inland, the erotics only obvious from a distance. This far inland you need something more sexual than dichotomy.

¹ “Inland”’s from a projected book called/ to be called *Prairie Style* (reference to the sort of long low midwest architecture pioneered by Frank Lloyd Wright but also, of course, w/ the sexual connotation). These are chunky lyrics: excessive, awkward, & yet “brief completed thought” (as Bernadette Mayer sd); they engage the literal world – in this case, the midwest (including animals, love, race, song, sex) – and yet are not attempting to distill its essence or tell a story. They’re not trying to be graceful. Dancing’s a sweaty thing – & sexy for that – , full of ambivalent gestures, a public spectacle, more than a little opaque.

Mnemonic Geography

Inland's what I can memorize and recite, section and number, what I can manage and get right. It's pronounable, certain that way. A quantity of heat polishes the road. The hesitation—my ambivalence—takes the place of racial variation, makes the high places straight. No misgivings, but the continent itself. If inland gives on nothing, I'm delighted; if it's empty, if I'm an accident waiting to happen, I'm delighted. It's the flat me, polished to overstatement—to overstatement's appearance—, edgeless and partial to nothing.

(to Michael Anania)

Afro-Prairie

Tempting for the voice to locate its noise, to speak of or from. Everybody wants to be the singer but here's the continent.

Fielding the question, Do you like good music?

Open love. In a recurring dream about the prairie, a thin hedge—along some railroad embankment—in which there's a gap to step through again and again, for me to step through, out onto the view itself. Not the literary ballad, articulated, but out onto the continent.

Sotto Voce

What's missing: my country voice, the miracle singing is, to vex and hound the speaker, to outfox him. (Originally the lyrics went, "where lived a colored boy named Johnny B. Goode.") What's missing's the way into what's visible or obvious from a distance; or a way to distinguish that from mirage, love's floating-in-the-air door.

(Where? Any man's body is an open set, a splayed intersection. Earth and wood, a little terror, a little happiness.)

Ballad Values

Love's a lazy slave and won't come to her name being called and called, is—finally—a poor interlocutress. The call might be a station—emanation, convergence, crossover.

The phrase—the sound—may lengthen but the variation's the same: it re-encounters the consequences again and again, it meets a standard.

Barry McKinnon

from *In the Millenium*²

what is it
we know / or imagine get to

what thought known to be ahead
in life, one inch from the beginning

at that moment of intense
sun

in lifes regret

downtown in slush

. . .

in the park I was thinking and cant say it

the
melancholic twist of truth that I'll never
get to know enough of you to think anything else but
what I do. therefore. . .

mark cynically, that I cant
work the s on garcias possessive.

garcias' garcia's

.

jan 2000, no illusions
not called
typing anymore

the world
a contradiction of attempts at connection to it/

I crave loneliness as its opposite

time: as matter; steam from the tub
my empty thought a slight revelation at the haze
of polluted red

I miss my green underwood. it implied its own time
& that future would wipe it out.

² *In the Millenium* is available at the website, "It's Still Winter"
(<http://quarles.unbc.ca/winter/number3.2/mckinnon/millennium1.html>) and as a chapbook from above/ground press
http://www.track0.com/rob_mclennan/aboveground_press.htm.

.
in the snow, no further out
than when I wandered as
a child

one horizon leads
to the next

snow -

mobile blazed trail, in seconds
where
they want to go

noise/ power

the instant churned

.
no punctuation for the heart!

diminished in the global sense
so much caring becomes diminishment/

failure.

you won't finally care.

invest.

be somewhere else

stupid

.
you're probably right
to the things I cant admit

so
whatever I thought or felt
tossed away

simply, we agreed to skate

in whatever we dont
want to say, try

again, junctures not unlike
me in the closet in 1951

amidst the shoes, leather & dark
till I was found

and pulled out.

.

pot is burned. my fault &
that the smell remains

to remind me of *all* I
did

& did not reveal in 40 years to ask

forgiveness

its really just a complete sense
of isolation & not in much control, so therefore -

I think of driving
into the future:

everything rage

but for the minuscule community -
instants of

us going against the global manufactured to raise
the collective chant:

fuck it

.

together we on't know where to go

from /it cant / be said

/it cant

be said

living, I cant imagine you dying.

.

the window looked west

later, a dust, a skiff - light march snow. suburbs
with an elevator, the lake, a bank of indian
land.

“they want a road.”

.

want a road

into these words, thots barely
to notice the nurse pleasant, caring and human in the seeming
cold millenial politic vs this kind of care

you dripping into a bag - bladder pain
pressure, tv up to yr right - nonsense to waste what little time

our small talk must contain

what can i say: without cliche. I
swear beneath my breath - angered by a finality
undescribed,

ourselves, I think later, today, two weeks ahead in life after
you died, not that death means exit from time: it is
time, - not a vale, but a folding in space without wind/air
when the last instant is a burst as if the beginning of the world itself now
reversed and only of itself,
as fact in all its puzzlement.

how to go on
to form resolve and be of this body about
to leave

.

“I’m taking this razor back”

the one I use
to shave you, thinking I’m this close (tho once we hugged
in a parking lot / later a gravesight & you winced at my move to
intimacy; therefore, distance & my fear, as they warned, of all

unresolved

.

in a complex, you taught:

root hog or die.

.

what can we do but imagine, that our life described
in whatever instant of thought becomes image (as the
picture of me, the baby, in yr arms - you sitting on the
root cellar door with . . .

time ahead.

this time that I now inhabit to cancel
my days.

.

no image/ in truth

no subject but time that contains our demise
so that my attempt at the invitation to place a letter in the grave -

I found, instead, a botched copper horse bulged in a desert scape that I tooled in an early grade;
you had it

copper to last forever. I tacked it to my wall

your empty grave

grieving, grieving
the resolve of the unresolved –

& only this outside guess
at your thought:
the conscious measure of each shallow breath, pressures
anxieties, indignities, embarrassments, false
hope

George Elliott Clarke

3 POEMS

Miramichi

Back country dudes get pornographically drunk,
when April seduces, bastes, the backlands:

Pussy willows go sexing the field edges,
soft and wet like that, open to floods,

so those oafs stumble round sugar bush,
voluptuously eat rain, vomit ale-grief,

or set out hooks to butcher fish, carping,
“Gouge em eyes out em skulls!”

(Grammar be hard, fish flesh is soft.)
They lord Peckinpah over Richards.

Lop-headed, lumpy-assed, log-footed,
fuelled by whiskey cruelty and loco lust,

they murmur—or cuss, fucking spoons
into shallow trout eyes, *cunnus*-like,

scoop up, chew em, like jellied *Smarties*.
They ain’t a bad person, a mean person,

and a well-meaning person, jus usual
Liberal Party fools, ornery, sippin

political holy water. They reckon,
twixt bootleggers’ orgies, twixt road

crews and unholy unemployment,
Life be hurtful to happiness.

Discourse

I

Are you tired of dying?
Is you?
Let journalists judge,
nattering—
O shit!—
losing their balance,
tipping into Negro-ish extremes,
random words slightly heinous,
condemning even the Bible
as negligible,
illegible,
ineligible.
Listen:
A very unfeeling poem
curdles paper;
ink poisons like a virus, toxic
(prayer seems instantly exotic—
like junkies sacking pharmacies.)
Crickets—I mean, critics—chirp
as they disembowel bees—I mean, writers,
purveyors of divisive sweetness.

II

We need to bring back Ovid, Rimbaud, even evil Pound—
sorrow-saturated, evil-infatuated lines,
horror-stricken whinnies, Yahoos' yappings,
encyclopedias that are masterpieces of rape,
English communicating Shakespeare and syphilis,
even illiterate, illegitimate poets
who should be published, maybe, or simply sung in pubs.

Understand: *making* means *poetry* in English,
but means *love* in Nova—*New Darkness*—Scotia.
Writing leaves your hand burned, your face gone:
Words' scalding black smoke gashes and burns.
So, my hand be bone, my face onyx tombstone.

O Muse! I jazz your pussy until it come poesy,
then I jizz it until it be song.

À *Violette Leduc*

Your unfinessed, not mollified, atrocious voice
Exhales sadness, ah, exhilarating sadness.
(Two sacks of vinegary *vin rouge*: your lungs.
Unwitherably ugly: your cock-eyed face.)

Your Hell is watered by Calvados and lager.
You swoon to ingest air passed through mud.
Maurice Sachs is your hated and hateful love:
You feel about him like you feel about love.

That whore-faced man, sometimes a docile
Imbecile, that alabaster bastard, wants you
To cast pain in painless words, tantalizing
And repellent. (He's tantalized and repelled.)

You crave uncrated oranges, cigarettes, a bag
Of wood, the quarrel of liquor in the skull,
A pallid, appealing man smacked with a pipe,
And fame, like Colette's—or unlike Colette's.

You can taste the sewer light of cathedrals:
You know their historical dirt: How *Deus*
Exquisitely excuses Sade or lousy Boches,
Or how priests are so languidly debauched.

A strand of hair and a smudged mouth, a bout
Of sex in *Pluviôse*, your pale hand washing
Through your *azzurro-negra* hair; you pour out
Your porous heart until you are heartless.

But French is sold, befouling—like 1st April
Mud mixed with wet snow, spattering you.
Your prose—a toxic syntax souring things—
Oozes *bel canto* bellicosity, love-sic'd lyrics.

uppers, Canada, land, hidden, no lower-class
middle passage. no flask
of flashing yellow magma,
spirits, rum, release, no fire
arms, tobacco, or too much cash.
or too little cash.
in the razor-thin space between my lines,
you may fit in. line up
and pay your sin
tax
at
the next
wicket.

here eyes bear the white burden
of watchful wardens
dutiful citizens in
lower mainlands
patrol each shade of un
white. each stray curl of un
straight. each singular hint of un
settled seeking for home

carry me, motherless child.
my tracks are so sweet to the stalker.
Mount Zion, baptize me abysmal.
Abyssinian of obsidian meridians.
I take to the night like winged carrion.
I am sweet to the stalker.
like an ibis, stems snapped
like reeds, I fly above
reptiles and annihil
ation. forever in flight against the sky.
painted feathers brushing versus eternity.
limbs in the image dangle.
snapped like photos.
finished like the tape breaks up
lifting the race. winged
in flight
without hope
of landing. Canada
geese band together
to kill their crippled
for fear of attracting
stalkers to the flock.
they peck.
a mess of splintered feathers.
hollowed bones.
shattered limbs.
frenzy toward the nest of night.
death.
no.
rest.

I am sweet to the prey.
my only thought: I fly on,
on, my sky home,
home

giovanni singleton

4 POEMS

indigo

the study of silence. its evolution a guard rail. a corrugated tongue.
teeth knitted together. silence leaves a strain of being work. of looking
almost dead. shade burns as if to interfere. photographs. a need to hold
still for a moment. everything that counts appears in past tense. time
accumulates as in a reflecting pool.

sepia

stooping in a darkened hallway. salt water bodies rock steady. muffled pounding. the door of no return. is
closed and closer. and under measured reconstruction. living seeps through in echoes. stillness outside in. a
collective breath persists without apology. mud stained spoons undulate from shore to distant shore. then
one day walk as if rowing a boat.

veridian

we us and thou. the voices. sound a decidedly downtown destination. the boulevard.
horns blow. fast and furious. ghostly drummer makes flight. some rap tap
tap tap tap. conductor of multi-directional speaking. crowds gather
behind cranial walls. all smoke-filled. boy/man. a vast expanse of skeletal
remains. spread down on the ground as in quilted covering.

marigold

spinning wheel fortune. stagger the root. warrior
rifts. a cataclysmic sight. mythical weave of bowed
heads. discontinuous dreams and drafts. drawing
hands. acoustic bass. plucked upright. mercurial
conjure. strings. such tongues ever
leaning as in revelation.

Giscombe to McKinnon (1/2)

Barry—Finally some notes for you. Rereading *The Centre*—in the context, perhaps, of *In the Millennium* and */it cant / be said*—I'm struck by how the book plunges at the close with "Arrhythmia." As though the rest of the book were a jam leading up to it. The earlier sections are easier to read—they're more airy (meaning ventilated, as it were, by speech and space both) and both lead up and don't lead up to the final section. Plunge? One thinks of bus plunges, a staple for some years of *NY Times* reportage about Mexico—they went over those cliffs all the time, according to the *NYT*. Shuddering downward—one imagines—rather than being airborne, a plunge full of ambiguity and in necessary stages, complex and articulated. Not always fatal but fatality was always part of the story. The book quickens there, at "Arrhythmia," in "Arrhythmia" and—forgive the pun—slows at the same time: the question of mortality has been raised and the answer is complicated, thick, more open ended than the rest of the book, more subject to provisional statement that is itself of course full of question. E.g.:

caught in a Saturday afternoon, slight hangover
work done - sex ahead, beer, steak - the mystery of wife from her
complexity - yielded simply to the admission of love?

And it's that the book is full of speculation and observation, "Thoughts/ Sketches," and improvisations against a background—the articulation against that or within it of a center and what a center (as we spell it in down here in the States) might contain or travel with. But you trouble that (which I mean as praise), you trouble the background the first two thirds of the book are, I think, for "Arrhythmia" by saying, in that final section:

...[B]elive it. but on the path - to feel as abandoned
as the woods, still & silent knowing the silence of the higher force.
dog, his head in the snow.

belived. go on - it is all made like a bed board, cut and simple. it is
a name like February - dark, to blue, dark to light, not as backdrop.

These lines are fairly terrifying and anticipate the two long poems you handed me in New York last summer, *In the Millennium* and */it cant / be said*. (Reading *The Centre* this morning also, oddly enough, in the context of one of the train books you passed me, along with the poems, that day at St. Marks; anyway, I'm realizing as I type this that both of those quotes above impact, more or less, on my experience of *The Canadian Pacific in the West*. I'll bring it up later in a way that I'll hope'll not be too cloying.)

In the Millennium defines the world, right on page one, as "a contradiction of attempts at connection to it" and that gets restated on the next page as "diminished in the global sense/ so much caring becomes diminishment"; later this mutates again—"my aging/ exaggerated// by the fight against it". This ain't no happy poem but it documents the now, as it were, of the future. In the poem the thing—including the future—finds a mobile truth in its opposite: the world's defined that way on that first page.

Perhaps this is the moment (or "the instant") to mention something you said to me when we were walking (summer 1999?) in Cottonwood Park and talking about the future itself, retirement, etc., and the relation to geography. "When you're here," you said, "you're nothing." Not meaning Prince George in particular but then, all meaning is local. I was impressed enough of course to remember it and to want to apply it to this work in particular, which I see as a way—because of those self-cancelling oppositions—of documenting the instant or, more to the point, the poem gestures at the instant even though—or because—it's not here. It's nothing; it's here and it's nothing at the same time. (It's a similar thing, obviously, to what we got to the first time we met in 1991. I was on my way to Giscome, B.C. the next day and it was a place that you had been and—maybe important for this context—you'd videotaped the town's destruction, that the lumber company bulldozed the houses—company-owned—after pulling out and resettling the populace. Anyway I was going out there for the first time the next day and we'd agreed—this after some beers—that it was there, that there was a there there, that Giscome was a place even though there was nothing there. OK, this is the sort of thing I see you doing in this poem and in "Arrhythmia" as well. I set

out that next day for Giscome with that opposition very much in my mind and it feels as important to me today, reading these poems, as it did that evening ten years ago.)

In the Millennium's the place beyond the end of the roads, the place where nothing is. It's different from the cleverness, say, of Mel Lyman's title, *Mirror at the End of the Road* (though Lyman's book, though romantic, was interestingly ragged and almost unreadable in places); it's where the poem goes, on out into the nothingness. All comes, as you say about the late valentine flowers, to zero, even with "bonus points" added. Here's the millennium. And yet the poem's furiously local: you allude to snomobiles (which can deliver us quickly to the future) and "in lifes regret" becomes, in the following line, "downtown in slush."

/it cant/ be said? Well, no, it can't. I suppose I see this as a continuation of the nothingness I see documented in the previous poem. And of the contradiction—it can't be said so write to say that. What emerges in both is the peculiar emptiness there is to big events: that the language—and its images—doesn't match the thing. This I take to be the topic here, that failure. Death? Well, that takes place in language too, doesn't it? (I don't want to get going talking about death but I have to say, to remember, that when it became clear that my friend Marianne Marsh's husband was going to die from his cancer I went in to speak to her about that and she just sighed and looked out her window and said, "Yeah, we've got a lot of shit to deal with." The same language would apply to buying or selling a house, to being on a contentious township committee, to planning for or cleaning up after a big party.) The world's blank canvas is out there: throw some death at it and that's just bonus points still adding up to zero—the impossible dichotomy between the resolved and the unresolved. You say, "There's no subject but time that contains our demise."

Impossible for me to read this poem and not think of Baldwin's "Notes of a Native Son" (which I taught quite recently, just a couple of weeks ago). The essay's an account of his father's death and also an account of the racism that Baldwin himself encountered working in defense plants—this was during WW2—in New Jersey and the racism that black soldiers were dealing with. "The tensions" (as newspapers call it) erupted into a riot in Harlem, this in August of 1943. Baldwin wrote:

....On the morning of the third of August, we drove my father to the graveyard through a wilderness of smashed plate glass.

The day of my father's funeral had also been my nineteenth birthday. As we drove him to the graveyard, the spoils of injustice, anarchy, discontent, and hatred were all around us. It seemed to me that God himself had devised, to mark my father's end, the most sustained and brutally dissonant of codas. And it seemed to me too that the violence which rose all above us as my father left the world had been devised as a corrective for the pride of his eldest son. I had declined to believe in that apocalypse that had been so central to my father's vision; very well, life seemed to be saying, here is something that will certainly pass for an apocalypse until the real thing comes along. I had inclined to be contemptuous of my father for the conditions of his life, for the conditions of our lives. When his life had ended I began to wonder about that life and also, in a new way, to be apprehensive about my own.

But the odd point that I'd wish to make in regard to this essay, Baldwin's, is that the account of the death of his father and his account of racism and riot don't entirely connect. Instead, they coincide. And they lay out certain things but the essay's not tied up neatly. The local apocalypse is coincidental to the father's death and I think this is fairly important. The essay jars and jolts, which is what good writing does.

* * *

In New York, you were kind enough to give me a couple of train books that were your father's (your uncle's?), knowing of my fondness for trains and railroads. Fondness? It's an old attachment, full of metaphors having to do with sex and memories and observations having to do with race (I'm old enough to remember the Jim Crow waiting rooms in the stations in Birmingham). And, as Alan Gilbert has suggested to me, there's a centerless quality to the North American railway system that I find important as spectacle, as extensive fact and reference.

I'll go on briefly about one photograph in D. M. Bain and D. R. Phillips' book, *Canadian Pacific in the West*. (And I'll try to figure out how to scan the photo in and ship it to you later.) It's Eric Grubb's

photograph of the track ahead, taken from the brakeman's position (the left side) on the cab of a steam locomotive, when the train was stopped alongside the Ottertail Siding a few miles west of Field, B.C. The photographer was leaning out the window and visible in the picture are the latch for the window itself and the long curve of the locomotive's boiler; the siding is presented joining the single-track main line and the Kicking Horse River and Tocher Ridge and, in the grey distance, the President Range take up the majority of the photograph's surface. The train is evidently stopped in anticipation of a "meet" with another train, one would be coming from the opposite direction. "When it was decided to include the photograph in this work"—note Bain and Phillips—, "we had no data about the train and the meet and it was decided that the caption would be prepared with information that can be surmised from the shot." A lot can be surmised: location obviously but then there are no white flags flying from the front end so it's not an "extra" train but a scheduled one. It's possible to tell that the switch—via which the siding joins the main—has already been thrown to accommodate the oncoming train's movement onto that track. Other things as well. One thinks necessarily of Pound's translation of Li Po and his commentary:

The Jewel Stairs' Grievance

The jewelled steps are already quite white with dew,
It is so late that the dew soaks my gauze stockings,
And I let down the crystal curtain
And watch the moon through the clear autumn.

(NOTE: Jewel stairs, therefore a palace. Grievance, therefore there is something to complain of. Gauze stockings, therefore a court lady, not a servant who complains. Clear autumn, therefore he has no excuse on account of the weather. Also she has come early, for the dew has not merely whitened the stairs, but has soaked her stockings. The poem is especially prized because she utters no direct reproach.)

But of interest to me is that the picture (quite alone in this volume which contains 23 photographs) defies the photographic genre of train porno. Train pictures tend to be "wedge shots," the head-like engine of the train coming at you at an angle so that you can see both the engine's side and its front end; the rest of the train streams out behind the engine, diminishing in size. Imagine a sperm cell. In Eric Grubb's photograph, the train's a set of machine details and these suggest the potential the train has to get itself down the track; this rather than the conventional and common picture of the train actually doing it. Grubb's photograph documents eros, the place of desire, not the depiction of desire itself, acted out.

I had lunch at a pleasant restaurant—The Sidetrack—in Field in summer 1997. I'd been cycling with friends from Jasper, down the Icefields Parkway to Lake Louise, and we'd split up there and I was a little sad on my way, the first all-day ride alone, from Lake Louise to Golden. But what's in the journal is this, about the place I camped in Golden: "A few minutes ago was the moment I like best for viewing the mountains: the sky's a pale blue without illumination, a static blue and the snowy mountains are static too in their whiteness before it." I'd thought at first that the mountains in Grubb's photo were the ones I wrote about but the direction's wrong—the range in the picture is near Lake Louise, not Golden, this in spite of my breathlessness at having "recognized" them. But it's the color value that survives in my memory and is similar to what I see in the picture. That and the starkness. Cycling, the mountains (and the prairie) are not scenery—they're places to cross, to soldier through; they're not scenery—that's for people in cars. You said, "dark, to blue, dark to light, not as backdrop".

A fondness for railroads? Well, the world's geography; I mean geography's irreducible in the world, a fact, opaque. Railroads describe it.

—Cecil

McKinnon to Giscombe (1/1)

head out

cecil: a few weeks ago on the phone I asked: *what are we going to do?* - a question regarding the why, when, what and where of the *philly talks*. we both began to laugh/ nervously. but this to say, you've plunged ahead and given me a wonderful essay/letter, new poems and notes I'll respond to here - make a plunge that I hope gets me to *somewhere* and *you* - to connect our journeying / returns

into the large concerns of our talks: *poetry & ...*

the complex practice of it that we may stand *reaffirmed / ashamed* together, also in a kind of happiness and laughter - bound as we are to attempt its secret/ lead our lives by it - baffled dumb/ to want/ any need to journey / return.

ten years ago: you in normal illinois and me in prince george, b.c. - an unlikely geographical connection, your voice on the phone - smooth, subdued, quiet, intelligent and polite beyond what I'm used to, introducing yourself quickly, a poet/a project - and to make a simple request: you needed an invitation and a letter to support your plan to track the black explorer and miner john robert giscome's journey and life in the mid 1800's viz his presence in b.c., on your serious premise of a family blood tie.

j.r. giscome / c.s. giscombe

and within a year, there you were in the parking lot of the downtowner motel in prince george. did I wave first or did we wave simultaneously? (we gave no physical clues for identification. I knew from scant historical information that j.r. giscome was black/you couldn't be white (I'd have been very suspicious if you were!

the blood ties.

now, here, your return via john giscome to begin the long journey - almost a decade ahead of you - into the poem:

giscome road

our immediate connection / spontaneous

difficult talk/easy talk. we, familiar with similar materials or lack of them, and *questions* - and a sense of a share in a cursed journey, if it were not for the almost promise that its very activity is what could equally save anyone on it.

we talked

into the night. back porch beer epiphanies/ and over the years of our talks to a kind of necessary knowledge - as if by articulating a shared skill, concern, and practice, each step ahead be taken more assuredly - give simultaneous courage in the foolish prompt to risk

words

the wilderness

the nothing

dumbly / head out

as early miners packing each thing for a journey into vast unknowns, up the physical canyons, thru miles of bush I can barely walk a block thru (cecil, that day on the giscome trail in the sheer and wonderful context of the “historical” moment, being with you, I was also being bled by many species of carnivorous bugs - and in fear noted trees shredded by recent hungry bears. how far did we go until we got the idea: *this, now, here*, the literal giscombe trail/ *his* portage on

to summit lake/the water
shed divide at 54 40 - longitudes and latitudes of history. I watched
you swim out quite a way.

our subject? what tools, what corporeal/ mind/ necessity let us start with an agreement, spit out without a thought, yet a *thought* we continuously return to by virtue of its curiosity - to a “theme” of sorts: “this is a place we decided, but there’s nothing here.”

right and wrong

the name’s the last thing to disappear

giscome/giscombe no more saturday nights there. who cares in the expectation of dislocation as normal in the canadian northern corporate practice and ethos? in recent history (the 50’s) the cheslata indians “removed” from their land by the alcan/kemano project, given scant hours notice before the flood. giscome emptied on scant notice in 70, (there’s a long list of other towns and people) - and most recently tumbler ridge, where I write this (a coal mining town shutting down) - a place in a huge transition that very much attracts me. in its disintegration to become a ghost town for eco tourists, old age pensioners, snowmobilers, poets, and misfits - I begin to feel, illusionary or not, a sense of being, temporarily, out of dislocation: these beautiful mountains, and air and cheap real estate - a real place in the detritus after they’ve gone, whoever they are (innocent or not). I’m thinking of the *what&who* in the ruthless discard of primal economy. what of value can be kept? what’s changed in america, the north -

here

& giscome, the town in 71, where joy and I felt not at home, but that this place *was* a home; she photographed each house, street, the school, the train station, mill, the machinery and *every thing* abandoned.

on one of those trips I drove out along eaglet lake until I feared going on. this sense of nothing ahead. a road to end without reason. where would I be in this momentary terror - my soul I literally sensed, gone - cast from the earth into *the diffuse centerless light*. is this *the* dislocation, or *the* terrified connection - (poem, now, as portage of our own necessity and making - words as map, tendril, trail and path to return to where? the poet going forward/ back on a syntactical bridge only strong enough, *in* this necessity - because we’re travelling light - to carry only his/her own weight? the words/words

got you to giscome road.

no back drop

.

here

you made words/large fact of a world once blank, *almost* empty, *almost* nothing/ went back

ward for/word into terrestrial multiples: jamaica to the babbling old man/ - a long lost giscom(b)e on a front porch - knew nothing you needed *to know*: no evidence at the primary source: *therefore*

cecil giscombe on a ten speed, poet peddling into the centerless light: jamaica, north america, normal, prince george, giscome, the prairie midwest - into

diffuse light.

(feet, head, and eye

into -

nowhere/somewhere, far, two directions, with open return. into & out of

describing it

head out

endnote:

many of the thoughts in my improvisation bounce from cecil's title *into and out of dislocation*. I think I'm just beginning to understand it (beyond the medical description of cecil's injured/ dislocated arm as described in his book) - in terms of his life and writing as an african american writer in america, *and* canada. the title poses a great millennial question: if we know, with varying degrees of intensity the arbitrariness of what being *into dislocation* is, (aren't we *all* in it, or about to be?) - then what is it to be *out of dislocation*? the *place* this question imagines is open to what human values we would presently wish to define it as (a real *place* without compromise or illusion?). what presence & location do humans anywhere have in the current psycho/sociology of what has happened/happening here/anywhere you care to look? (the world's largest clear cut in the bowron valley, is 40 minutes from prince george - large, invisible; it's "nothing", they say. the unrecorded world, *this* close, (20 minutes from giscome) - yet, minimal fact given the human dislocations & disturbance of the larger daily world eco/human diaspora. a question:

the task of poetry?

poetry/

what I've wanted. the poem itself (an artifact/ *real* place) - & have I also wanted the very moments of its act & its energy (integration/location) - to include, as well, a necessary, disintegration of its conscious *and* unconscious premises? by this I mean the practice I think I see in george stanley's new work: he writes / builds a line that seems dismantled *at the same time* - to reveal accurate processes of mind and life moving to their jagged truths. this want of a new world! this want of the new poem! get a life, I hear them say while "real life goes on" into and out of the language and world at hand. *into & out of*

I think the task - & cecil so large among the others I admire for taking it on - is to break form, break ground, *be* ground (*not* back drop), so that when the radio's on, the static clears.

now voice and music are heard, and the pleasure of the information to make what need be known and said, visible.

works cited:

the line “journeying and returns” is the title of a book by bp nichol. the line “reaffirmed/ashamed” is from william carlos williams’ poem proclaiming: “I am a poet! I am a poet!”. references to “this is a place, we decided...” – the line is from cecil’s essay “border towns, border talk” published in *diverse landscapes: re-reading place across cultures in contemporary canadian writing* (prince george: unbc press, 1996. beeler & horn, eds.). “the name’s the last ...” is from *giscome road* (normal il: dalkey archive press, 1998). various titles I’ve taken from *prairie style*, cecil’s ms. in progress, “real life goes on” is a robert creeley quote on the back jacket of *into and out of dislocation*.

Barry McKinnon
tumbler ridge/prince george
jan 2001.

Giscombe to McKinnon (2/2)

Barry—A quick final note before we buckle down for the trip to Calgary. It was your concern w/ Giscome, B.C., by the way—and Joy’s photographs of the place in *Repository* magazine—that got me up into all this business in the first place. George Bowering saw the pix (& mentions them in your interview w/ him in *Open Letter*) and, years after, when I was corresponding with him about other stuff, he recalled them and the name of the town in question and suggested the coincidence to me.

I’d intended—as I sd on the ’phone last night—to include an outtake here from my talk on innovation & miscegenation (which touches on things Fred Wah talks about in his hybridity book [*Faking It: Poetics & Hybridity. Critical Writing 1984-1999* {Edmonton, Alberta: NeWest, 2000}] which just came from Amazon.com) but this afternoon, even with edits, it feels too bulky, fibrous. Maybe we’ll get to it in Calgary.

Tried to fold in a scan of the marvelously erotic train photo I mention in my previous note to you but the equipment has failed. I’ll Xerox copies & pass ‘em out next month.

o o o

words

the wilderness

the nothing

An ABC on nothing here, in continuing response:

A. That being here’s the statement of or about being static (or the static itself), unmoving, a sitting duck, an easy target. Nothing. That it’s quantifiably better to keep moving and, as Mr. Paige’s coventional advice goes, not look back. In movement’s trace is something affirmative: movement’s a statement of ability, of will & process.

[From Pierre Joris’s Nomad Manifesto, <http://www.albany.edu/~joris/nomad.html>:

- 1) that language has always to do with the other, in fact, for the writer (l’écrivain) is the other.
- 2) that there is no single other, there are only a multitude of them - plurality; even multitudes of different multitudes - hetero-pluralities.

3) language others itself always again - nomadic writing is always “the practice of outside”; writing as nomadic practice -on the move from one other to another other.]

B Alongside that is that one can make the nothing palpable. When I began writing about the midwest I had a vision (?) of the voice speaking from nowhere. And so, at the risk of sounding romantic, there’s the desire—in speaking from nowhere—to articulate the nothing. Here, I think, our intentions coincide some: you said, “we, familiar with similar materials or lack of them, and questions - and a sense of a share in a cursed journey, if it were not for the almost promise that its very activity is what could equally save anyone on it.”

C. So we talk.

—Cecil

Wayde Compton

Response for Phillytalks: Giscombe/McKinnon

When I read C. S. Giscombe’s *Into and Out of Dislocation* I came across his rendering of an African-Americanism: “no matter where you go, no matter how far, no matter to what unlikely extreme, no matter what country, continent, ice floe, or island you land on, you will find someone else black already there” (10). This aphorism is familiar to me, but not through a black channel, through a Chinese-Canadian friend who once told me something basically the same, with an addition that, if grafted to Giscombe’s, would read like this: “no matter where you go, no matter how far, no matter to what unlikely extreme, no matter what country, continent, ice floe, or island you land on, you will find a Chinese family already there, and they will be running the restaurant.” Jeet Kei further added that this family you will find will probably have no history or background in restaurantering, but will have quickly figured out that by virtue of being Chinese alone, people will buy their food, and will “buy” them as restauranteers. Jeet Kei told me this because I had just come back from Inverness, Scotland and was marvelling at how strange it was for me to be in a town that was mostly white, but more than that, a place where the white people were all of the same *ethnicity*. My friends from Inverness, when I talked to them about the seeming racial homogeneity of their town, explained with some pride that there was now a Chinese family here. Yes, they ran a restaurant. In Thomas King’s novel *Medicine River* the Native-Canadian protagonist receives a letter from his brother who is wandering abroad:

“Dear Will,” [the letter] said. “Thought I’d write to let you know I’m still alive. Didn’t get to Australia yet. Stopped off here in New Zealand. It’s a real nice country. Hey, it even has Indians, but they call them Maoris down here. I’m taking of for the South Island tomorrow. Going to climb a glacier. How are you doing? (144-145)

There is always someone _____ - _____ already there. No matter what continent, ice floe, or island *you are from*, you will find someone also from there too, where’er you roam.

I wonder if this aphorism on farflung-ness is a lament, phrased as Giscombe has heard it in that particularly African-American way of dryly expecting the worst. Why would someone black preceeding you be negative? Because I also wonder if the aphorism isn’t meant as a cautionary proverb: there is no escape. It’s akin to the saying, “The only two things you have to do in this life are stay black and die”; there will be no remove to individuality, there will already be the images and tensions of your race wherever you get yourself stranded, so don’t get any ideas about getting away from it. If you are James Baldwin in a secluded Alpine village surrounded by French children clamouring to touch your kinky hair, claiming to have never seen a Negro, dig a little deeper—you’ll find that there were blacks in that very village in the

previous century or millenium, bootblacking or conquering from elephantback. The people there—the people *wherever*—are always going to believe they already know what you are. The aphorism is cautionary.

Ishmael Reed, on the back cover blurb for *Into and Out of Dislocation*, says it “reads like a modern slave narrative, only the writer, a university professor, is seeking heritage instead of freedom.” But Giscombe is not dogged north for simple connection to ancestors who preceeded him, but rather it’s an inversion of Afrocentrism that moves him, an Afroperipherism, an Afrocentrifugalism tugging him to the outskirts to find a cipher who himself didn’t fit the description, to the place where identity may or may not cohere. John Robert Giscome was not a runaway slave, was not exactly a hero, was only maybe a direct ancestor, who went to the edge of things and stayed there, who didn’t complete anybody’s idea of an odyssey, really. But his name got affixed to the ground not unlike a *vèvè*. Names on the ground are more tenuous than *Roots*.

In American Giscombe’s imagination, I realize, I am the “someone else black already there.” I am, against all the lessons of my life here, somebody’s autochthon. Wow. Although I was born here, my work has been a long seeking for precedents and a slow coming to belief in this place as the actual place of my ethnic making. Joe Fortes is my Vancouverite “someone else black already there,” though I have not traveled to here from elsewhere. Imagine the words “born in the outside” sung to the tune of “Born Under a Bad Sign.”

“There are no black people in B.C.” is a commonly voiced rhetorical statement, and what it says under its breath is, “...and the exceptions you can trot out don’t count because they’re not real blacks.” We have B.C. ancestors—the blacks of the nineteenth century—but they are, like Nathaniel Mackey’s re-mythologized Andoumboulou, a population who did not reify, who failed to multiply or stay, and who were, all said, not really the progenitors of the black population that is here now. In Wilson Harris’s novel *Jonestown*, the narrator, obsessed with the unexplained abandonment of certain Mayan cities *before* Columbus, writes:

I dreamt I had been robbed of my native roots and heritage. I suffered from a void of memory. I belonged to peoples of the Void...*But there was a catch, a shock of breath, in this sensation...*The *shock* of the ‘peopling of the Void’, the animals of the Void, the creatures of the Void, became so extraordinary that ‘extinction’ imbued me with breath-lines and responsibilities I would not otherwise have encompassed. I became an original apparition in my wanderings... (7)

So extinction allows for reinvention, so what? It’s all still blues.

Is Giscombe’s black travelogue a quest for Shklovskian defamiliarization, a way of making “black” strange, to make it either *over there* or *back there*, to look at it again, to look at self again? This is a different kind of yearning than Jack Spicer’s deference to “the outside.” Spicer’s “Martians” and “spooks” (he called them that sometimes, yes) were an expression of a desire for remote control that only one more or less already in the driver’s seat could intone. But, O my I.D., I feel like a porter’s son; I’d like to drive for a change. I don’t need any more of the outside in me; outsiders done staked enough cantons in me already. I think Giscombe’s “out there” is different, is a blurring crossfade, not a Spicerian disavowal. There’s a mutuality he expects, and that’s different than a romantic jettisoning of ego in the woods.

So much of the African-American subcultural imperialism we suffer brings us “black” as tough, redeemed, definite. “Say It Loud (I’m Black and I’m Proud)” therefore I am. Brian Fawcett writes of Malcolm Lowry living “in the interzones between the worn-out Cartesian universe and the wilderness” (Popatia 77). Giscombe, cycling, wants the rubber to meet the road on those and other interzones.

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George Elliott Clarke

Subject: Re: Giscombe/McKinnon

Date: Thu, 25 Jan 2001 10:19:46 -0500

On Thu, 25 Jan 2001, George Clarke wrote:

- > I'm sitting down at 11:15 p.m. and trying now
- > to respond to the pages [...] and I'll register
- > again my discomfiture with e-mail [...] Here goes!
- >
- >
- > The thematic, the trauma (?), that runs through the
- > exchanges last week twixt Giscombe and McKinnon is
- > one strikingly, brilliantly, unavoidably too (?), of
- > Fear and Terror, as if these states of anguish were
- > two jealous Gods. Strange and rich how words like
- > "terrifying" and "terror" (as in "love might be a
- > terror") strike across the paragraphs of Giscombe
- > like Old Testament lightning, and then how "fear"
- > and even "terrified" connect McKinnon's own fierce
- > replies.
- >
- > But then, maybe what's going on is a mutual looking
- > at the void and the omnipotence of roots, place,
- > identity, the SEARCH, which is everything, though
- > maybe not likely to end up grounded in anything
- > but the grave. Yes, it's one locale that the poets's
- > thinkin bout place keeps gravitatin toward. When
- > Giscombe comes to McKinnon's Arrhythmia, he sees,
- > lookin into the abyss of the page, the sense, he
- > sees, "Shuddering downward," like an emblem of
- > danger and death, image(s) of "bus plunges" in NY
- > Times Day of the Dead reportage of Mexico, but
- > the point is "the question of mortality," and the
- > lyrics--discontinuous, direct--of McKinnon are
- > "fairly terrifying" because they recognize, suggest,
- > "Death" that it "takes place in language too." The
- > downbeat of it all is that the excavation of the site
- > of being is ultimately funereal, or a dredging up
- > of fossils, of talismans, or simply an unmasking
- > of place as gravesite: "the local apocalypse" that

PhillyTalks 18

> Giscombe sights in Baldwin's riot-torn Harlem. His
> seeing that all rhetoric is a passage through wilderness
> to nothingness, the wilderness--"terrifying"--of place
> we's all ULTIMATUMLY displaced from (save for the six-
> feet-deep/shallow six-feet-long, 3-feet-wide void
> we do get to "fill"--temporarily).

>
> What is we all but VOICE, a taste of wind, foul, sweet,
> circling, unleashed, ephemeral, except for what gets
> grounded, in electricity, ink, even arranged light
> on some screen, a VOICE that is comin from somewhere,
> someBODY, formed outta memory of accents, traces of
> sayings, hymns, them SPIRITualS, expletives, gasps,
> wailings, stutters (nostalgia), the hot cussin often
> necessary, howls, sighs, hmmm, all of it meltin
> instantly--terrifyingly--like Giscome, B.C., the
> place that's no place save for what Voice poet Giscombe
> come and give it! Voice is the place it's in, the
> "all meaning is"--"furiously local." (Can I get an Amen?)
> See, what we understand is the vanished Giscome, in
> unBRITISH undeservedly Columbia, is spoken through
> someone's memory and someone's voice, especially if
> raptured, transfigured, in a poem (portable void a
> voice fills). When McKinnon re-member (re-populate)
> that there village/trace, that place "emptied on scant
> notice in 70" becoming, like other desolated places,
> a "ghost town," him people the void with spectres,
> 'hants,' him do what the poet must, give shape to
> the disintegrated, voice to the disappeared, to
> make the wasted lands spring forth with witnessing,
> protesting, re-membered ghosts: so the stones cry out
> and the trees talk back and the slain oppressed rise
> up and put on flesh, make 'er dry bones stroll,
> march, dance right on top the supposed grave!

>
> When McKinnon say "the name's the last thing to
> disappear," think of the absurdity of headstones,
> how, yep, the names be the last thingamajigs to go!
> This kinda stony, imposed "immortality" (in
> memorial marble), of course is unreal as Ozymandias'
> desire, and just as unstable. Quick to self-destruct.

>
> What we may want, even if a-"feared," like McKinnon
> say, "going on. this sense of nothing ahead," even
> the terror of the "terrified connection" that is the
> poem, what we may want is faith in conjure, in
> conjuration of the passed-on, the abandoned, the
> forgotten, the recollection of the voices, the truth
> in the voice like the gold in the mine, to comb dirt
> and detritus, yep, and come up with draughts of gold.
> What Giscombe say, 'at the risk of sounding romantic"
> --!!!--"there's the desire ... to articulate the
> nothing" and the nobody and the nowhere, meaning We
> are, us poets, archaeologists and mediums, historians
> and coroners, paleontologists and priests. IT IS

- > unavoidably ROMANTIC! Romanticism be the desire to
- > conjure up the speech of the dead souls and the
- > devastated animals and greenery.
- >
- > You see, what McKinnon AND Giscombe is saying, not
- > in so many politics-polluted words, but das capitalism
- > don't want to hear no rememberin, no histoire, no
- > gone--disappeared--anythin, no 'obsolete', no 'passe,'
- > no nothin already consumed and no 'consumer' now long
- > consumed by worms. Uh uh. De Romantic/Gothic project,
- > natchal to des poetes, be to disRUPT dem capitaliars
- > by resuscitatin de victims or de resisters, restorin
- > 'er voices. De threat of vengeance is de horror dat
- > de re-assemblin of de words unleash for de master
- > bosses. You hip? Remember! It's the poetized words
- > that strike back at evil even after you's dead,
- > buried, bones!
- >
- > Checkin out, checkin into, Giscombe's Inland (sense
- > of place resonant in title, think 'landin'), you get
- > the plot (the space, also the narrative), a foxiness,
- > the clarity of the necessarily sly, necessarily
- > predatorial, words "coming into view, as if to meet"
- > --nay, devour--"the speaker." It's about comin inland,
- > settlin, becomin "an image, an appearance in the
- > literature" (a foxy deed, that), "a fixture in the
- > imagination of someplace," becomin--like aggressive
- > pioneer/explorer/conqueror of yore--statuesque, but a
- > pliable statue, flexible, maybe even phantasmal, like
- > the man says, "a favorite ha'nt." Yo! You, poet, like
- > any place, disappear into mere words. You go "Lincoln-
- > esque": nothin but skull fragments, stovepipe hat,
- > and, most important, Gettysburg Address. You got to
- > choose yo remains eloquently. Uh huh!
- >
- > Then too, I like how Giscombe get certainty next to
- > uncertainty: "half a belief's better by far or one
- > broken into halves" even though "love's a terror"
- > x 3. Then how he autopsies "race relations": "White
- > men say cock and black men say dick." Here be some
- > definite clarity. And "Eros," like brothers always
- > knew, be "tawny," "swarthy," "more 'dusky' than 'sienna.'"
- > The colour of an "Afro-Prairie." Amen to that re-
- > definition, buffing. For truth is in the vernacular
- > like gold is in dem hills. What it comes down to:
- > "Any man's body is an open set, a splayed intersection,"
- > of course, also, "a little terror." What's the terror?
- > O silence, O inarticulation. Why? True damnation is
- > having no words, no way to call a poem, a tree, a
- > lover, beautiful. But, BUT, buT, Love is "inarticulate
- > and lazy." No contradiction, that. Rather, a splendid
- > ambivalence: inarticulation=terror, =love. You navigate,
- > find your way, your balance, no final answer: you understand
- > the poetry is not answering any question about music, but
- > "(Still fielding the question about music)," i.e., raising

> your VOICE in your PLACE.
>
> Looking at McKinnon, again I see, the focus on "momentary
> terror" and also heavily light ambivalence: "nowhere/somewhere,
> far, two directions, with open return. into & out of..."
> Ian Fleming (Bond guy) said, in one of dem novels, "It is
> better to travel safely than to arrive," a somewhat cryptic
> sensibility, but a sense of it exists here, McKinnon
> writing, "in fear noted trees shredded by recent hungry
> bears. how far did we go until we got this idea?" Really,
> in McKinnon too, see a terror of eternity. His essential
> question, Poundian, "what of value can be kept?" Oh my,
> oh my. It's the damned/damning question that only
> eternity can answer. All us would-be Ovids, all us would-be
> exiles from our own time, preferring to lounge in eternal
> glory, we cower before the Judge who will choose: Time.

>
>
>
> --George Elliott Clarke
>
>
>

Looking again at the exchange, later in the same morn,
I ain't said a word yet bout my own location, its
voice, specificities, its nearness to grave and to oblivion,
comfortable, comforting, ya know? So here I be, rattling
the bones of the hard-plastic alphabet, in a room in
Toronto, English-speaking Canada's 'greatest' (in
size) city, on the border of the first-tier First World
(not necessarily "Free" too), just 90 or so minutes
from the true Promised Land (by car), gateway: Buffalo,
NY! But the language spewing from off my fingertips--
like sweat or film of DNA'd bio-grease--got formed in
skull-womb by my black/Micmac mother's voice (singing
natchally in de African United Baptist Association
de Nouvelle-Ecosse [Nova Scotia] church [local]:
Cornwallis Street United Baptist Church, founded by
escaped slave, Richard Preston, in 1832) and by my
father's African-American mother's/West Indian sire's
voice. SHE was James Brown/True Confessions/Eaton's
catalogue/Coca-Cola & boiled pigtails/Santa Barbara
(fave soap opera)/Wilson Pickett/Aretha Franklin/Rex
Harrison/Elliott Ness/Montreal, Quebec/kindergarten/
nice hats/silk and satin whenever possible/black-eyed
beans & rice with hot curry/rum/children/all dat/voice;
HIM was Yma Sumac/motorcycle Eastern Seaboard/calypso/
CBC radio/Waltrer Cronkite TV/Harry Belafonte/Beatles/
beer & pretzels/carpenter & social work/locomotive
railway (cf. Giscombe) black male wid fedora, scarf,
overcoat stylish/angry and suave/frustrated folk-artist/
voice. Also influential: ocean, salt smell, Atlantic,
spirituals done old-style, weepy-eyed church vocals,
black folk still black amid all dat snow, a certain
rum (rhum in French), Alexander Keith's (pronounced

"Keats" by us "Africadians") India Pale Ale, wimmin
toilin in rich white houses, menfolk layin tar on
rooves or scavenging in the city dump (Africville
in Hfx demolished just like Giscome!, sir), sailors
(Amurkin or Wessinjun) comin for da gals (too purty,
wid da straight-hotcombed hair, smell of butter and
raisin or just fresh-April'd linen!, kisses full of
sultry wine, and dem hips/behinds, good for da limbo!),
45s and 33s brought up from de "Boston States," a
whole culture--Negro US--in exile under the British
flag for 200 hundred years plus!, world-class nasty
pugilists risin up out de alleys of Halifax, goin
toe-to-toe with Ali (in him decline), or rippin into
other world heavyweights, rippin off Olympic medals
left and right (usually silver), or occasional musicians
(think Nelson Symonds of Hammonds Plains, NS, jazz
guitarist now resident in Montreal) jammin wid da Duke
hisself in long-gone Africville ("Sophisticated Lady"
got composed for him Nova Scotian-rooted gal pal), or
there's a theologian--Black Baptist of course!--goin
from New Glasgow, NS, to Princeton Theological Institute
to teach(!), or some diplomats, federal politicians,
ferryin genetics of apple blossoms and chemistry of
molasses off to world-capitals, some of us folks even
migratin to Africa (especially Sierra Leone), or
there's rhetoric of back-country guitar, of bootleg
moonshine and a lover's gold or mahogany or ebon leg,
of pressed 'naps', of woodstoves (Southerly) and pumpkin
pie, fresh mackerel shouted in streets!, smelts in April
jacked by flashlight, of seaweed and seagulls, of some
fool wakin everybody on the Cosby Kid-like city block
by blowin taps on his dented tin bugle every dawn at
6 a.m. cos he'd been in the US ARMY!, and Bible lessons,
you got it, and lemon oil to clean up ashy legs/arms,
and Langston Hughes poems to keep the spirit, and lotsa
British poetry--make it Shelley and Byron and Yeats,
s'il-te-plait--cos it was a UK colony once, and the
white gals smilin too your way (now-and-then), and
taste of harmonica out a window, trains moanin, some
delicious tension in yo drawers, some delicious release
too (etc.), and so--
Me come from all the above, with a cracked voice,
some British banjo mixed with black-ass piano,
some Canuck mojo, some Nofaskoshan accent,
some unplacated place....

Attached are three poems, neither deliberately black
nor white, neither Canajin nor Afro-Amurkin,
neither here nor there.

--George Elliott Clarke ("Rex States")

giovanni singleton

This and all along. . .Initial experiential view of Giscombe/McKinnon. . .coming at it from many directions.

[Note: The "response" following this note has taken cues from several things, most prevalent among them—my present gig as a teacher of the endlessly debatable thing called the "Jazz Poem" and also by recently mandated "Rolling Black-Outs" here in a geographic province commonly known as "California." The sheer irony of the state-wide "Stage 3 Power Alert" has truly been something to see and not to mention that whole darn chad business with its resultant 4-year Bush sentencing. And at this moment, I'm hearing prophecy raining down from the Sun Ra Arkestra's "Along Came Ra" as sung by June Tyson:

When the world was in darkness
And darkness was ignorance
Along came Ra(2x). . .

Luckily for me, sunlight does stream through via the writing of Cecil Giscombe and Barry McKinnon. Within the context of a life being lived, what follows is my spider-webbish approach to McKinnon's long poem "walking", Giscombe's book *Giscome Road* and selections from his long work "Prairie Style." There are also references to other works and topics mentioned in their correspondence. Hopefully, there are sufficient guideposts. Onward.]

* * *

"One day it will happen. It could be happening now that a voice from another dimension will speak to earth. You might as well practice and prepare for it."
—Sun Ra

Looking at or seeing a tree may attune one to one's own bark. Human nature. Try to be natural. What's happening out there in the margins? or in our very own arm pits? A drop contains an ocean. Bodies of water. Our bodies—land and water. To know the lay of the land. Ourselves as land masses. Geography of the interior by mapping the exterior. Uncovered/discovered maps as thought patterns/waves, anatomy of the brain. Repetition.

Exploration where the boundaries dissolve. Observe the one between the comedian's joke and the audience's laughter (if there is any). To travel. To traverse. "This land is my land. This land is your land. . ." Giscombe's "Inland" and *Giscome Road*. History, our own and all of it, is always exactly where it was made, its place of birth. And what of this music? To make it one's own. Musicality of the forest and of a bear's heavy steps. Caution. Washed ashore I'm sure. Tell us what you know. What got you here? Has nature curved back around and become ours?

The word “Giscome” yields:

is
me
come
so
go

The word “Giscombe” yields the above plus:

be
comb
mob
gob

Predestination. Turn on “be” and “beingness.” Au natural. The sky too has beat its own path. Stars litter and light it. This being our own good fortune. A battery for longevity? As if by being there, I could be there. Maneuvering this is the way it is sometimes. You don’t have to be hooked to have dreams. Hands, feet, forks—all things connecting us to down here. McKinnon and Giscombe move us closer to higher planes by flying us down low. The keys are in the listening.

When angels speak
They speak of cosmic waves of sound. . .
—Sun Ra (from the poem “When Angels Speak”)

“Sound Carries” section of the book-length *Giscome Road* published by McKinnon’s Gorse Press and included in *Giscome Road* was got to by way of “Imagine the Sound,” video-taped interviews with musicians Cecil Taylor, Archie Shepp, Bill Dixon, and Paul Bley. Punctuated too by accidental discovery of Bill Moyers’ public television spectacle, “The Sound of Poetry” featuring Jane Hirshfield, Mark Doty, and Lucille Clifton. Sound records most relationships to streams, roads, and meadows. For the record. In *Giscome Road*, maps and diagrams mutate into mirrors of interiority. A handbook for trekking over the edge. The edge and the end but not a completion. Bird Watching may help us remember how to fly. Dolphy’s fluted wings.

Flight. Fleeing. And for trains. To Barry, Cecil wrote:

Tried to fold in a scan of the marvelously erotic train photo I mention in my previous note to you but the equipment has failed. I’ll Xerox copies & pass ‘em out next month.

Writer moved to California from the East Coast on a train so to see the middle. Flatness. Prairie. Towns and country. Cows and the Continental Divide. Open space. Traveled this uncovered/discovered geography via Percival Everett’s 1985 novel *Walk Me to the Distance* set in the “big-sky country known as Wyoming” where in one character says to another, “The edge is where you should be, brother!” And Everett’s work is an “edge” typically known as the Mid-West and the West. In his novel, *God’s Country* set in 1871, Everett maps a rewritten Great American Western complete with “criminy jacket” and “figgered.” One main character is a Black man named “Bubba” who is reputedly the best tracker in the West. Finders. Keepers.

Trains too were a sanctuary for Duke Ellington. He loved the sound of the whistle up ahead. Made for compositions. Trains track. Soundtracks. This A Cool World we living in. Recording of the stretched out lines of writing detail *Giscome Road*. Hobos hitched rides on freights. And too Neal Cassidy et al.

Much consideration of the slipperiness of the “center” notion as much as that of the “border.” Although, I am without McKinnon’s *The Centre*, I’m intrigued by Giscombe’s note to McKinnon about it:

Rereading *The Centre*--in the context, perhaps, of *In the Millennium and It* can’t be said--I’m struck by how the book plunges at the close with *Arrhythmia*.

A plunge that slows. Gets to the end(ing). In the poem “Favorite Haunt” from *Prairie Style*, Giscombe writes:

. . . I got to be an appearance at the center of things, a common apparition,
neither heaven nor hell.

I’m still believing “center” to itself be an “appearance” or is that “apparition.” *Arrhythmia* as being “neither heaven nor hell.” A question of the necessity of borders and of crossing them (up).

The primacy of love and loving. Could this be wailing? McKinnon and Giscombe on the nature of love. Both get going and get to the thick of things. Expansive elements. Was it already here upon our arrival? Before our eyes and needing the warm and reassuring (is) comfort of words’ expressivity. from McKinnon’s “walking”:

are greener pastures over the hill in a storm cloud? in
scotland I didn’t quite know

Eros located in every country and every animal to be sure. Dare we go up to it, greet it and be believed? McKinnon continues:

my own dark self

in time decay- & endless day out to desert/metaphorical sea. still
to complain water is not the world
to guess at
where the walk will end. near the sea?

It is said that the crawling comes first. Then the walking. But then we become but for how long? Certain motion is not mysterious. And mystery clings still at the beginning and ending of each step taken.

What has the weather to say? In *The Waves*, Virginia Woolf looks from a train and becomes “part of this speed, this missile hurled at the city.” And later, of course, her body, her breath waves good-bye and is hurled like a missile at the sea.

I’m now left more curious about the ways/manners in which we quench our thirsts. John Coltrane’s “Sun Ship.” Jimmy Garrison “walks” his bass alone. Call and response for a 5-minute climb. As we follow a trail or the sun, so too the trajectory of illumination and its eventual descent into. . .A whistle or bell.

california
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