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Memory Stretches and Love Streams : Interconnectivity, Nature, and Romance in Michael McClure's "Dear Being"

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追憶の拡張と愛の流れ：マイケル・マクルーアの「ディア・ビーイング」における相互接続性、自然と恋愛感情

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Abstract

For more than half a century Michael McClure has been writing unique poetry about spirituality, the environment, and his place in contemporary society. Published in 2010, "Dear Being," a collection of thirty-seven poems dedicated to his wife, is a noteworthy addition to the poet's canon. Writing about the natural world from a mystical-scientific viewpoint, incorporating Buddhist sensibilities, and intermingling his perceptions and experiences with memories he forges a truly mature volume of work. McClure continues to develop his usual themes, however maturity and passionate love infuse the sequence with a dimension of acceptance and oneness with the universe that help the poet achieve serenity in the twilight of his career.

要 旨

半世紀以上にわたりマイケル・マクルーアは、精神性、環境、そして現代社会における自分の居場所についてのユニークな詩を書いてきた。彼の妻に捧げられた2010年出版の37の詩のコレクション「ディア・ビーイング」は、詩人の真正の作品であり注目すべき彼の作品群への追加となった。神秘的、そして科学的な観点から自然界について語る彼の詩は、仏教の感性を取り入れながら、追憶に認識や経験を交えた真に成熟した作品となっている。マクルーアは引き続き自らのテーマの展開を続けている。彼の詩人としてのキャリアの終盤にあつてある種の静謐さを達成するため、宇宙の受容とそれとの一体感という次元において成熟と情熱的な愛が、新たな詩を注入するものとなっている。

I. Archetypal Romantic

The Beat Movement was an assemblage of divergent personalities who, nevertheless, shared a belief in a new literary vision. Since the days even before his renowned reading at the Six Gallery, Michael McClure has been formulating and developing his unique version of this vision by incorporating diverse ideas that stretch from classical thinking and ancient spirituality to the avant-garde and cutting-edge science. McClure has been labeled an “archetypal Romantic in the full-blown heroic sense that Goethe was” because of his extraordinary range; while primarily lauded for poetry and drama, he is an equally competent essayist, spiritualist, naturalist, and performer (Meltzer 150). Nearly six decades into his career he continues to fill these shoes adeptly.

In his 2010 book, *Mysteriosos and Other Poems*, the vast majority of verse has been grouped into poem sequences around loosely structured themes that cannot be neatly categorized, as McClure’s whole self spills into nearly everything he writes. McClure succinctly sums up the tome as “remembrances, discoveries, experiences, and imaginings” (ix). It is all of these and more. He continues to develop his canon; writing about the natural world from a mystical-scientific viewpoint, incorporating Zen Buddhist sensibilities, and intermingling his perceptions and experiences with memories to forge a truly mature volume of work. The thirty-seven poems comprising the sequence entitled “Dear Being” expand on these themes by focusing on the poet’s late-life romance and the wisdom of his years. Through a series of close readings this paper will show that “Dear Being” resonates with Michael McClure’s long-held beliefs about universal interconnectivity, spirituality, ecology, and sensuality, however, being in the twilight of his career, maturity and passionate love infuse the sequence with a dimension of acceptance and oneness with the universe that help the poet achieve serenity.

II. On Familiar Ground

Recurring themes have guided McClure’s poetics for half a century. His unending curiosity about the interrelation of spirituality, science, the ecosystem, and how mankind fits into this vibrant equation, have driven his poetic vision from the get-go and continue to inform and inspire his worldview. Since the 1990s his work has taken

the shape of what Jack Spicer dubbed the serial poem, uniting and interconnecting his myriad of themes, and even recycling lines and images from his canon. At this stage of his life everything is connected and interdependent upon everything else, including the lines of his verse. Accordingly, "Dear Being" is an environmental poem, an anti-war poem, an exploration of consciousness, a "spiritual autobiography" (*RL* vii), and a commentary about his immediate surroundings and contemporary society that are all united by passionate love. In the author's note to *Rebel Lion* McClure defines poetry as "the action of the senses, of what is heard, seen, tasted, touched, and smelled as well as what is imagined and reasoned" (vii). Clearly, "Dear Being" is all of these, merged together, having neither beginning nor end, resulting in a textual Ouroboros. The poem sequence, as Scalapino dubs McClure's groupings of poems, is a finely simmered stew of his life's work seasoned with his ideals, memories, and previously penned lines, to which dashes of spirituality and contemporary perceptions are added. It all culminates in a fresh take on his life that is extremely familiar.

Just as McClure's poetic themes remain familiar so do the structure and mechanics. Projective verse serves the poet well, giving him the freedom to follow the flow of a poem's substance without being restrained by meter, line length, and rhyme, yet capable of including elements of form when the need arises. For the most part, though, the poet's consciousness shapes his work. Much has been made of the shape of his poems on the page, and McClure insists that when he writes the lines "come out centered" (*LC* 132). However, here he deviates from his hallmark style of centering lines; the poems in "Dear Being" are not centered exactly, nor are they flush left or right. While there is some centering, many of the poems drift slightly to the right as they progress. In fact, the sequence is unique from all of the other verse in *Mysteriosos* simply because it is not centered. This singularity signifies to the reader that a different reading or viewpoint is in order. McClure states in the introduction that the "unending war against nature is the crisis from which I write" (ix), so with that in mind, perhaps the textual deviation reflects the crisis; the world has lost its focus and it is not properly centered. Moreover, the non-centered lines could indicate the poet's anxiety about aging. Alternately, because he has commented that the shape of his poems is aesthetic as well as based on his breath, the variation may be mechanical rather than an indication of deeper meaning (*TE* ix). In reality, it is probably a combination of these ideas. However one interprets the shape of the sequence's poems, there is freshness and spontaneity that differentiates "Dear Being"

from much of his other work.

McClure's use of capitalization also distinguishes his verse and can cause confusion. He has stated that the lines containing capital letters are not intended to be read more loudly, but instead to "distance the reader" and "disrupt the flow," while simultaneously signifying a "small shift or intensity in the voice or mind" (*RL* vii). Simply put, the capitalized words and phrases should be emphasized in the heart and mind of the reader. As in daily experience, some things strike us more vividly, demand closer attention, or preoccupy our minds, and the poet wishes these lines to make a stronger or different impact on readers. In addition, the use of uppercase letters makes the reader more aware of the poems as living objects; they too ebb and flow. At times the technique lends a playful tone too; McClure's work often delves into heady territory, and the capitalization often deflates the weight of the poet's perceptions. Peters offers an alternative idea, suggesting that the blocked capitals reflect the slogans and headlines that bombard us in daily life. Indeed, capitalization infuses the poems with a sense of immediacy and stylistically mirrors the complexities and mixed messages prevalent in contemporary society. Wisely, the poet advises readers to disregard the capitals should they get in the way of experiencing the poems (*TE* ix).

Because "Dear Being" reflects the poet's long career, its themes, shape, structure, and techniques are familiar to veteran readers. Those who are new to McClure, however, should not let his distinctive style impede understanding, appreciation, and actually experiencing the poet's inspiration and central message. While the verse is all interrelated—relying on poems that have preceded it and informing the poetry that will follow—it easily stands on its own. The poem sequence is a natural progression of McClure's life work, and it serves as additional testament supporting the argument that he is one of America's greatest living poets.

III. Patriarchal Sage

Being in the twilight of his career, an air of maturity and wisdom guides the poem sequence through its various moments. McClure is acutely aware of his advancing years. He refers to himself as an "old man" several times (#1, 2, 27, 37) and also cites physical deterioration; weakening muscles, a receding silvery mane, wiry white eyebrows, and wrinkles flavor the poems with grandfatherly benevolence. Naturally, there are references to death—including a tender elegy to Philip Whalen—and at

times he sours on the aging process, "the anguish of age is not speakable" (#21, 25), yet the central message of the poems is not bogged down by geriatric laments. Instead, the septuagenarian's mature point of view, enhanced by his Buddhist sensibilities, carries a tone of patriarchal sagacity. The poet's insight about the golden years combines seamlessly with memories and immediate perceptions, and the sequence emerges as a celebration of life's intricacies. Clearly, it is the work of a man who has lived a full life and who appreciates both the ecstasies and the tribulations that he has experienced.

IV. War All the Time

No discussion of McClure's work is complete without mentioning his anti-war stance. He has been a staunch opponent of war for the vast majority of his career; he abhorred the government's Cold War rhetoric, was outspoken against the Korean and Vietnam Wars, has denounced the decades-long ratcheting up of the military industrial complex, and he has protested the Gulf Wars and America's numerous, unilateral military interventions around the world. He fundamentally rejects the political institution that perpetuates the constant state of war that the United States puts itself in. While the poet's political views do not feature prominently in "Dear Being," armed conflict surfaces in memories and among his perceptions of contemporary America.

Inspired by a Memorial Day television broadcast commemorating the names of the fallen, poem 22 is the sequence's most overtly political protest poem. McClure agonizes over the "tiny, poor nation[s]" that the country has "morph[ed] into a Hell" (8-9), wondering which state will be next, and he condemns the leaders who "drool sugar into our ears" (14). He despairs because the public, blinded by nationalist rhetoric, often believes the sugar-coated lies, or worse yet, ignores the injustices, focusing instead on the inanity of pop culture. Somewhat uncharacteristically, the final stanza is one of pure rage: "NEVER / BEFORE / NOT ONCE, / NOT ONE FUCKING TIME, / in a lifetime of wars, have we seen these jitterbugs / prancing on stages in front / of the National Symphony Orchestra while / the armed forces march carrying flags" (15-22). The capitalization clearly indicates his fury that those responsible for America's numerous wars have never truly been held accountable. His biting sarcasm damns America's hawks; we have seen the "jitterbugs" prance on stages and in parades,

waving the flag of nationalism, but we have never seen them prosecuted before a jury. In this single poem McClure exposes himself as one who still struggles to overcome the grief and anguish that war causes.

Other references to war are less vitriolic, although they still sting. “The Dark Ages are here, with the bombs / and dollars of fools. No Compassion. / The concords of greed are being delivered in tanks” (#34, 7-9). McClure acknowledges that we live in bleak times, but in this poem he is able to divert his attention from the carnage, lack of compassion, and greed by switching focus to his beloved and the natural world. Despite the horrors, companionship and the landscape lift him above the devastation. Cautiously optimistic, the poet hints that America’s preoccupation with military dominance might someday wane. “THESE CRUELTIES / are stuccoed on the future / in dense, clumped pigments of war tanks and lies: while we endlessly free ourselves / from all but old age, death, ignorance, / and childhoods of hallucinations” (#6 12-17). Like plaster that crumbles and falls away, the constant state of war, it seems, can be overcome, unlike some of the other calamities that mankind faces. While he concedes that there is no escape from aging, death, and foolish revisionism, there is hope that mankind will one day escape the terrible cycle of war that it has fallen into. Although McClure is disillusioned by the military injustices being waged in the name of freedom, he surpasses the unpleasant reality by focusing on his beloved, embracing nature and spirituality, maintaining a hopeful attitude, and by transforming the negative energy into meaningful art.

V. Everything is One in the Cycle of Life

McClure’s work has always been spiritual in nature. He has described himself as “a spiritual seeker” (*LC* 297), and in the mid 1990s his interest in Zen Buddhism deepened and it became more prominent in his work. In the introduction to *Mysteriosos* he indicates that the exploration of Buddhist Hua-yen thought significantly shapes “Dear Being.” Originating in seventh century China, Hua-yen Buddhism stresses the interconnectedness of all things and the reciprocal relationship between mutually dependent entities. Simplified, each thing is composed of, or interpenetrates, all other phenomena, and therefore everything affects and is affected by everything else. Not one to pigeonhole things—people, artistic and literary movements, modes of spirituality—McClure explains that Hua-yen is the fruition of

the integration of Buddhism with Taoism, and he adds that "it's the sister sect of Zen," and about physics and "the non-physics of nothingness." Although Zen focuses on meditation, he sees the two schools as "essentially the same thing" (*LC* 297). This concept may seem contradictory, and it is certainly complicated, yet it hints at the big ideas by which the poet is inspired and that he aspires to convey in his work.

The theme of interconnectivity dominates the thirty-seven poems that comprise "Dear Being." On the most basic level, the sequence abounds with lines and images from McClure's earlier work, and thus ceases to exist on its own. This frequent repetition seamlessly integrates the compositions into the poet's canon. For example, the opening line of poems 8, 9, and 31, "YOU ARE MY MEMORIES OF YOU," is also the first line of three poems in the "Graftings" section of 1995's *Rain Mirror*, and can ultimately be traced to "Dolphin Skull" penned in the same year. In truth, the closer one analyzes the poet's work since 1995 the more "borrowed" lines one finds; recycled lines from "Dolphin Skull" and *Rain Mirror* are too numerous to catalog here. Viewed in this light, "Dear Being," and much of McClure's other recent work, is a functioning example of Hua-yen thought in that the poems themselves are all interconnected and literally penetrated by previous work. The poems themselves are organic examples of the poet's Buddhist sensibilities.

While permeating the sequence, Hua-yen Buddhism plays an especially prominent role in poem 25. McClure's poetry resembles a river, and life itself, because it is a successive series of progressive moments; the third line is apt: "in the flow it is all changeless yet never the same." The poem continues with an explanation of the flow, the interconnectivity of all things, that links the poet with prehistory: "minute, gleaming pink shells, once filled / with living gray meat, / fossilized and encased in swirling marble / under my shoe soles on a stairway / in Stockholm are active in columned / structures of my cascading neurons. / This is my cortex" (4-10). McClure acknowledges that the entire history of the planet, and by extension that of the universe, is within us all. Triggered by the marble staircase his awareness of the connection between the polished stone, the shells, and his body is fascinating because he seamlessly combines spirituality with science, and it makes perfect sense if one accepts his dictum of interconnectivity. The poem continues with a quote from Bodhidharma's "Bloodstream Sermon" encouraging the reader to look within, and McClure's subsequent explanation, "this means there are dumbbell shapes / of energies and nothingness / with no beginnings" (13-15). The poet acknowledges that

the essence of matter has always existed, and that its “flow” cannot be confined by shapes, bodies, or the human concept of time. Although the shape of this particular poem is not that of a free weight, one cannot help but wonder if the term “dumbbell” alludes to the visual composition of his other verse. Moreover, juxtaposition of the concepts of energy and Zen nothingness and the dumbbell highlights his ability to see the infinite in the mundane, and it also undercuts any pretentious tone. Not only is everything a part of the big picture, but each thing is the sum of the grand design of the cosmos. The notion of interconnectivity harmoniously binds the poet with everything that surrounds him, and it substantially shapes his worldview.

Because Hua-yen thought interpenetrates the entire poem sequence some of the more notable instances deserve mention. Poem 12 begins, “‘MIND’ MEANS NOTHING BUT CONSCIOUSNESS — / a rock has it and a toadstool / and a field of particles in a complex protein / as it loops, tying a knot. My mouth / with your nipple in it / is the rising of thought, / as are the apples that rot / in the drawer, inspiring Schiller” (1-8). McClure encourages us to be aware of the interconnectivity of everything: the human mind, sexuality, the rocky earth, fungi, and even tiny proteins. The reference to Friedrich Schiller not only links McClure with great academic minds, but also hints at his longing to “be a brother” of his literary heroes (*Mysteriosos* x). The knot-tying particles flow through all phenomena and bind everything together, implying the harmony of the universe. This all-inclusive interpenetration of energy is “AN OPERA WITH LIVING BEINGS / smaller than viruses playing the tympani” (14-15); each entity has a specific role to play, and the divine dance between the different parts combines everything into a unified whole. Moreover, each part is every other part.

Reflecting his cosmological mindset, the poems in “Dear Being” are a system of intercommunicating cells and energies. For example, two poems explicitly proclaim the singularity of all things by recycling a similar phrase. About the cremation of Philip Whalen, poem 35 states, “it’s all the same: / nous, pneumas, psyche / are parts of the soul” (7-9), which refers to the catalog of synonyms about the spirit, as well as to the idea that living or dead, flesh or spirit, energy is constant no matter what form it takes. The same phrase appears, although without an overtone of grief, in poem 26: “IT IS / all the same. / Old age or childhood, it is all renewable, / reversible, delivered with a warranty / that nothing is there in the nothingness” (5-9). True, there are elements of a boy in an old man, and vice versa, but according to Zen thought nothing

exists but the flow of energy, and one form of energy is not superior to any other form. McClure posits an identical idea in the essay "PIECES OF BEING;" "one point of perception is no less subjectively relevant than another — all are parts of a whole" (*SBS* 127). Everything is one in the cycle of life; everything interpenetrates all other phenomena. Stylistically, capitalization adds additional emphasis to this basic truth. It is all the same — young and old, past and present, life and death, and even McClure's poetry. Once again, he actively puts Hua-yen thought into practice via recycling and renewing familiar phrases.

McClure's poetics cannot be separated from his spiritual beliefs. He is a firm believer in the Taoist notion of the uncarved block, an idea that complements Hua-yen thought. His understanding is that:

all time/space occurrences of the past, present, and future are one giant sculpture of which we're a part. It's not as if something is going to exist in the future or that something has happened in the past, but that it's all going on at once. And we're in it. And if we're aware of that, there's a *proportionlessness* that is a liberating state or condition. (*LC* 12)

Clearly, "Dear Being" projects this awareness, and the poet's acts of experiencing the world and penning the verse liberate him. McClure's guiding principles enable him to focus on images and moments and subsequently transition effortlessly to different perceptions because he believes in the unity of all things.

VI. Everything Pours into Him

The notion of things merging, or morphing from one form into another, is a corollary of Hua-yen Buddhism, and it, too, is an integral element of McClure's poetics. Most of the poems in the sequence blur lines between flora and fauna, past and present, real and imagined; the poet notes, "they slip in and out of the sizelessness of moments, and from the being in one moment to another without linear chronology" (Shivani). McClure is interested in the process of consciousness, and because the mind functions nonlinearly his poetry reflects the indirect flow of his thoughts. He explains, "the inner life that we create balances and joins, in part, with our unconscious life, or with the forgotten life of our childhood, or the life of our father, and that makes a complex and richer interior" (*LC* 297). Accordingly, "Dear Being" echoes the all-inclusivity of this dictum.

McClure includes the substance of everything in his work, and the numerous observations and recollections that morph from one image into the next are mutually dependent. Because images change in quick succession akin to the open mind during meditation, his poems are often disorienting and difficult to follow. Yet, it is precisely the challenge of trying to make sense of the disparate images that engages the reader and makes for invigorating poetry. Rather than complete comprehension, McClure hopes that the reader's experience of poetry will lead to understanding the inspiration of the poet. The beginning of poem 6 blends perceptions linked by the concept of color. "SOMBREROS THE COLOR OF CHILDREN'S / COOKIES. Colorlessness at the edges / of things. Radiances of blue-silver / clouds and mountain ranges / of cool white fog. I'm dressed in a black suit; / you, you are dressed / in the color of your eyes" (1-7). The poet uses the various hues, and the absence of color in line two, to melt each distinct image—the Mexican hat, the landscape, the protagonist and his wife—into the next. Interestingly, the protagonist wears black, the color often thought to contain elements of all other colors; a Whitmanesque assertion that he too contains multitudes.

This maxim of all-inclusiveness permeates "Dear Being," but it can be found in his other work as well. Indeed, it has been a part of McClure's mindset for most of his career; as far back as 1969 he stated, "I am many" (*LC* 167). Poem 7 presents images of a hunter, neo-Nazis, and Russian skinheads terrorizing African students before McClure dissolves the boundaries between them, acknowledging elements of each in himself. "It is all inside of me. I could do it all. / Capable of every corruption. Perfect / in atrocities and gentle sensual love / I AM HERE TO SEE IT AND TO SMELL IT / AND TASTE IT. It is always inside / of me—exactly like this" (17-22). Like Whitman's persona, the poet perceives it all, experiencing and feeling everything; he transcends space and time, conceding that each of us encompasses the full range of human emotions. Poem 8 proclaims a similar dictum. "EVERYTHING IS ON TIME AS IT POURS INTO ME! / ... / I am part of all! / I will kill, torture, maim Palestine / and tease it with fire. I will / bomb the Balkans with heavy metal / and piss in the rivers and sky" (15-21). Along with goodness, the poet also embodies evil. He is a warrior and a polluter, a "trembling spirit [that] is capable of everything" (22). McClure does not shy away from the negative aspects of humanity, but acknowledges that each of us contains the sum of human experience. While doing so, however, the poem's overall tone never sustains the malice. The poet accepts the numerous shortcomings of

mankind, as well as his own, but a mindful tone and knowledge that he too possesses the capability to harm deflates any didacticism, prevents him from falling into despair, and in a sense, frees him. True to his Buddhist sensibilities, he is able to notice, accept, let go, and move on.

McClure's compositions are living examples of the Hua-yen notion that everything merges together, as moments and images slip from one to the next throughout the sequence. The poet is aware that he embodies the sum of the universe and that all elements contain his being, therefore boundaries—between mind and matter, positive and negative—dissolve, and a feeling of inner peace prevails. Despite this cosmic consciousness, however, McClure always maintains a personal touch. The first person voice that is employed is not that of a persona, but of McClure himself. The poet inhabits the lines, and an indispensable component of the verse is its backbone of experiences and memories. He is interested in how acute perceptions intermingle with recollections to impact the present. As Hua-yen thought is a dominant construct of the sequence, all of the merged observations and recollections are mutually dependent.

VII. Stretches of Memory: Slipping through Time

Clearly, the past is an integral element of consciousness for McClure. "Dear Being" strings together a procession of images and memories that often seem dissimilar. McClure's take on the rapid-fire morphing of images is that one recollection acts as a springboard for subsequent, and often seemingly unrelated, ones.

One memory would bring another memory into being. Sometimes memories changed in the middle of a stanza, then I began to sense how one of them would light up another related memory and that memory would light up another and that one would light up another. Then a constellation of those three, having been lit, would light up another which would seemingly be disparate but was related to the constellation of the three, when they appeared together. (*LC* 130)

McClure writes what he calls "energy poems" in that "they are compressions of many aspects of experience simultaneously ... made up of separate and sometimes illogically complete references, which put together, all mean one new thing" (*SBS* 65). Poem 11, for example, opens with an uneasy feeling, "BRAVE, FEARFUL, SCARED TO DEATH

/ by the boredom” (1-2), and the prick of a kitten’s claws that induce a trip to the past. Memories of a light show at the Avalon Ballroom in the sixties conjure appropriate images from the era; inspired by hash, acid rock, and the psychedelic light show the poet is propelled into an alternate reality. Long-gone thoughts and images dance through his mind, mirroring the swirls of light racing around the ballroom. This memory then morphs into a sensual one: a flashback commemorating the sexual liberation of the time. Ecstatic memories enable McClure to alchemize the initial anxiousness of the moment into a fresh state of liberation. In this vein, the entire sequence of “Dear Being” is a collection of immediate observations mixed with memories that are strung together to capture moments that encapsulate his entire existence. The poet’s perceptions in the present trigger memories that enable him to transcend time, yet they also crystallize a specific moment. McClure skillfully blends and balances the amalgamations of memories and present realities resulting in new insights and inner peace.

Each poem paints a picture of McClure’s mind and the way in which it works. “In writing [the poems] I became open to unexpected shifts, to slipping through time, and to moving through once-closed moments” (*Mysteriosos* ix). A hooting owl in Maui inspires three quick images in the second line of poem 16—trouble, childhood, and love—before returning to the local flora, leading McClure to declare, “everything happens at once, in one time” (4), after which he proceeds to present that moment. Fleeting images of native fauna are instantaneously replaced by an image of armed conflict, which subsequently propels the poet to remember motorcycle-cruising during the Vietnam War era. Old age is forgotten as “memory streams / ... / roars forward and backward, / and trickles like water through roots / of a potted shamrock” (11-15). One would expect the whirlwind of images to be hazy, blurred by time and amnesia, but instead each is presented clearly and vividly, and the reader races through time with the poet. The memory streams are as real and as relevant as the love and the animals at the beginning. Then the poem returns to the present, an image of the coast and the surf, before concluding, “BUT WHAT THIS MEANS IS / that the truth of shifting / complexities is purest gold” (20-22). McClure revels not only in the moment, but in his recollections, and the interplay between them as well. Simultaneously, the lines pay homage to the Buddhist tenet of constant change. The reader experiences the distillation of a moment in time that provides a glimpse into the poet’s mind, the poetic process, and the sheer joy that McClure derives from both

living and reliving his life.

Likewise, poem 29 provides insight into how merged memories inspire him, and also into the creative process. The opening observation about his wrinkly skin quickly triggers thoughts of his grandfather. McClure follows this with a description of the memory process, "as I grow huger I become streams / stretching into shadows of memories" (3-4). The idea of "growing huger" refers to the poet's state of consciousness; the ever-increasing awareness as disparate recollections flood his thoughts. His mind is literally being stretched into the past. The word "shadows" indicates that once-forgotten, repressed, or compromised memories often appear from the depths of the cerebrum, lending new insight into the present. It is now McClure who is the old man. The poem continues, "we are huge figures at small doors / of caves looking into the blue / air over the hills before us" (5-7). On a literal level the image portrays the poet and his wife observing the view from just inside a cave entrance. On a metaphysical level, however, it can be interpreted as analogous to the memory process; the "small doors" are openings to vast, airy recollections in the "shadows" of the mind. Proclaiming the notion that we actualize an inner life for ourselves, the poet asserts, "we are temples of conscious pasts / and futures and all fantasies / that our meat creates. With these / we rub selves against what is not there / and we laugh and cry out / AND / MAKE / BEAUTIFUL SONGS / OF IMAGINATION AND WARS" (8-15). Human consciousness amalgamates memories—fogged by time, influenced and compromised by one's worldview—with the illusory waking world. McClure believes that "poetry [is] the product of the flesh brushing itself against experience ... brushing ourselves against the universe of real, solid illusions" (*SBS* 102). While artistic expression is forged from the imagination, experiences, and illusions, it is concurrently shaped by present reality: "every inch on the road, every rock / and burr under the foot is exact and real" (17-18). McClure skillfully combines the myriad states of consciousness to express his feelings and capture the moment, but solid grounding in the present ensures that his work does not become overly esoteric. He demonstrates a hyperaware balancing act of multiple sources that results in an interesting glimpse into not only his mind, but the poetic process as well.

McClure is fascinated by the way the mind works and how perceptions and memories affect one's current place in the universe. For example, the blending of immediate perceptions and recollections detailed in poem 15—the blue textile dye

juxtaposed with the black-eyed deer and red-brown earth, the smell in the hayloft calling to mind the stench of a pigeon egg he cracked open as a kid, the stoned motorcycle rides, the scientific discussions over cups of coffee—has shaped him into the man he is today. And the manner in which all of these are interrelated “SPEAKS TO [HIM]” (21). The sum of one’s experiences and the way in which one’s consciousness processes memories and integrates them with current perceptions play an essential role in defining who we are. Not to be forgotten, he is also interested in how external stimuli influence us.

VIII. One with Nature

McClure’s childhood ambition to be a naturalist and the anthropological course work he did at college fostered a respect for nature that informs the bulk of his work. The poet’s lifelong fascination with science infuses the poems with an organic quality and charges them with pulsing energy. McClure’s poems are living entities: flowing, surging, and completely linked with all life on the planet. The poet’s canon is steeped in deep ecology—he has opined that “poetry is biological” (*SBS* 138)—yet unlike fellow Beat Gary Snyder, whose poetics are rooted in place, McClure’s verse ranges from the microcosm to the macrocosm: mitochondria, striped honeybees, Himalayan blackberries, a rock in the yard, the murky surf, the edge of the solar system, the Milky Way. Nature surrounds us. In the midst of it all is man, a mammal comprised of “meat,” whose very existence depends on the bounty of the ecosystem. As mentioned earlier, the poet notes that the continuing war against nature has been a driving force behind his work (*Mysteriosos* ix), and upon close inspection this becomes quite clear as almost every poem in the sequence incorporates elements of the natural world.

On the most basic level, the poem sequence overflows with biological images, indicating McClure’s acute awareness of, and interest in, the natural world. One cannot help but notice and admire the sheer joy the poet derives from observing the biological universe that he inhabits: a doe and its fawn outside his door mesmerize him; the succulence of Maui’s cherries and mangoes tickle his taste buds; the hummingbirds sipping nectar outside his bedroom window inspire him; thorns prick his fingers as he picks blackberries; and the yellow sunrays through the windows warm him (#15, 17, 23, 28, 30). McClure cannot separate himself from the environment (nor does he wish to), and he constantly engages it with a sense of

wonder and reverence. The poet's awe of being an interlinked part of the planetary ecosystem infuses the poems with a tone of childlike glee, and also reminds the reader about the miracles of nature and the importance of being mindful about one's surroundings.

"Dear Being" repeatedly emphasizes McClure's dictum that humans are inherently connected to the natural world. The second poem declares, "I am here! I am there! I am a blooming apple tree, / and giant squirrel of childhood vanities" (9-10). Rather than pitting mankind against nature, the poet aligns himself with it. Poem 1 also conveys this notion; he sees himself as "a dog with jowls, a silver fox, / an eagle in the whirlpool" (11-12). McClure effortlessly equates himself with the natural world; barriers of duality are shattered. Both poems 8 and 9 include the line, "I am a flowering" (one that first appeared in "Dolphin Skull"), insisting that mankind's connection to nature extends beyond our animal cousins, and by extension, beyond the planet and the solar system. The sequence's fifth poem explicates mankind's unity with nature: "The flesh is outside in the branches / rubbing shoulders with the odors / of cherry blossoms" (14-15). Once again, we are reminded of McClure's idea that poetry, and consciousness itself, is "the product of the flesh brushing itself against experience" (*SBS* 102). Kinship with the environment is as ancient and as significant as human relationships are. Although McClure's deep interest in science saturates his verse, it never feels antiseptic or clinical because he is able to propel himself far beyond academic discourse into the realm of the mystical and the spiritual. True to his Hau-yen sensibilities, he views himself as one with all other entities in the cosmos, and therefore starry-eyed dreaming does not seem out of place: "MOUNTAINS OF MATTER / MADE OF STARS / and / I love it, I know the dark materials / contain the miracle of light that has nothing / behind it (nothing!)" (#10, 1-6). The poet's head is in the clouds, but his feet are firmly planted on the earth, as he recognizes and celebrates the interrelationship of all natural phenomena.

McClure also proclaims that nature imparts wisdom of the ages, and that he has learned a lot by being mindful of the ecosystem. The image of the pale purple rose in poem 12 alludes to nature's stimulating inspiration, which thereafter induces powerful, romantic feelings in the poet (17). On a more profound level, the lines, "I know all things as I see the color of mauve / blossoms above the green grass and oats in the field" (15-16), in the fourteenth poem capture a divine moment of truth; that instant in which we know the answer simply by opening ourselves to nature. A

striking thing about these realizations—and the sequence brims with them—is that they never feel forced or didactic; the insights flow on the pages, and effortlessly from the pages to the reader, akin to the way wisdom via experience penetrates the poet. The example cited above about “know[ing] the dark materials” functions in a similar manner. Time and again McClure trumpets the vital role that the natural world plays, not only concerning poetic inspiration, but for all aspects of human existence. Phillips argues correctly that McClure’s vision of “a new biologically-informed worldview” is integral for the survival of the species and the planet (“Let Us”). Through example, the poet subtly encourages each of us to engage and be liberated by the natural world, and thereafter, to use that experience and knowledge to better protect the ecosystem and understand our place in the cosmos.

McClure has always insisted that mankind is no more important—and no less important—than any other entity, be it a single-cell amoeba, a jaguar, or an entire galaxy, yet once in a while he hints at the limitations of the flesh. In poem 32 he imagines, “I am as free as an agate in a sand pile. / I am always this free, this chained, this swathed / in wrinkles, and withering, and baby’s smiles” (13-15). Each of us is trapped in a body, and one senses the poet’s disappointment and mild frustration with the physical deterioration that accompanies the aging process. The image of the baby smiles, however, prevents the poet from falling into deep despair, and it reminds him of the temporary and cyclical nature of existence. The lines, “I will never be as free as a sea anemone / to move outward beyond substance past the stars” in poem 18 strike a similar tone (15-17). The lines can also be interpreted to mean that existence in the modern world is often constrained by responsibilities, such as work, family obligations, and permanent addresses, ill-affording us sufficient time and resources to engage in personal desires and global (and galactic) pursuits. Yet, these misgivings are few and fleeting, as McClure does not wallow in self-pity or gloom for long. Rather than focusing on limitations, the image of the flatworm more aptly represents his mindset. Since the sixties he has used the small invertebrate as an analogy to explain his understanding of revolt because it is able to shake its tail free of the head and regenerate. The image appears in poems 17 and 32, conveying the sheer liberation that results from rebelling against societal norms and learned behaviors, becoming independent, and viewing existence from a fresh perspective. McClure’s poems encourage the reader to rise above the melancholy and monotony of the industrialized world, to align oneself with nature, and to celebrate one’s place in the biosphere.

McClure's view of biological phenomena is nothing short of visionary; his are "deep-seeing eyes / looking back through the muscles of mastodon hunters / out towards / the edge of the solar system, / and fallen white flowers in black grass / reflecting the light of the Milky Way" (#17, 2-8). He writes about boundless ideas from a mystical-scientific point of view, imbuing his verse with fresh originality that respects ancient truths and the sanctity of the natural world. He is as connected to the physical world as he is to his intimates.

IX. Love Streams

For the vast majority of his career McClure has been writing romantic, sensual verse; from the tender declarations of affection in the late fifties and the raw sexuality of work like "Dark Brown," to the jubilation of newfound love in *Rebel Lions*, his passion poems are unrivaled by the other Beats. Rightly so, Peters suggests that McClure is "a major love poet." Even when he focuses on war, aging, spirituality, and nature, the images often inspire romantic feelings; affection is never far off. "Dear Being" amalgamates McClure's myriad themes, yet a tone of loving devotion remains the sequence's central motif, especially since it is dedicated to his wife, the sculptor Amy Evans McClure.

Marital bliss reigns as the overarching motif, yet McClure occasionally flashes back to past love. The first poem opens with the lines, "NOW I UNDERSTAND, THE SEXUAL ADDICTION / of my young manhood / was a CRUCIFIXION" (1-3). Forty years after the sexual liberation movement that blossomed during the swinging sixties the poet has come to terms with the sultry Jean Harlow character that inhabited some of his plays and poems of the period. He has matured, and the monkey has been transformed into a lion roar of romantic passion. Once he was "distracted by the loves and the treacheries," but "NOW AT LAST I AM HERE, / loving only you with your lynx eyes" (#3, 13, 17-18). The poet still recalls "the old times when love hurt" (#23, 4), but he credits his wife with helping him transcend the past and fostering "HEROIC, MUSCULAR, MEATLY COURAGE / to go on living. / You brought this to me" (#1, 20-22). Once again, he looks back, but remains firmly focused on the present. The sequence professes McClure's deep love and respect for his beloved, and it functions as a tribute of his gratitude as well.

McClure is a poet of the senses. Therefore, even though he is in his late seventies

he continues to embrace erotic love. While recalling the psychedelic light shows of yore sparks fond memories of “secret sex acts of glory” (#11, 20), the other sensual imagery focuses on his beloved. Despite advanced age, the tenth poem’s image of “two figures in orgasm” (10) overshadows the wrinkles and is unencumbered by the physical inadequacies that accompany aging; “the softness of damp skin on your thighs / under the quilt / is the instrument of sizeless focus” (18-20). While intimacy among seniors is not something most people want to think about, the poet proclaims that fleshly pleasure is an essential element of all romantic relationships: “NOTHING MATTERS BUT THESE LUXURIES” (21). Since McClure has always been a strong proponent of experience, he sees no need to hold back simply because he is older. On the contrary, he celebrates marital passion, even boasting, “the hummingbirds sipping nectar at the window / envy our sensual delights / and our bed” (13-15). While erotic images such as these surface, they do not dominate the poems. Much more prevalent are the metaphysical romantic references.

The sequence focuses on the profundity of the poet’s love and the feelings that are evoked by his wife: the muse of “Dear Being.” Unashamed declarations of love blossom time and again throughout the thirty-seven poems. Although the poet often reflects on days gone by, lines such as “I would rather kiss your hand / on the morning sheet than be as young / as the sun cups in the field / for a thousand years” (#6, 18-21) demonstrate that he has no desire to be anywhere but in the present. By this time in his life McClure is able to enjoy simply being in the company of his beloved; “I am so glad / to be with you. / THERE / IS / EVEN / PRIDE / in sitting next to you and eating a fish taco” (#25, 15-21) and “I love the blessing of your breath and smile” (#29, 20). Poem 15 crystallizes a moment in which he pinches himself as if to ensure he is not dreaming, “I am almost stunned by you and I catch my breath” (23). Lines like these, expressing pure, deep-felt adoration, can be found throughout the sequence, making his devotion unquestionable and solidifying the poet’s reputation as a true romantic.

Clearly, the relationship has made him stronger. McClure acknowledges that his wife has helped him to transform the sexual issues of his youth into “this love, invented for you” (#18, 20). His muse has spurred him to channel his energy into their deeply profound and long-lasting love affair. Moreover, he depends on his wife and is interconnected with her, as evidenced in poem 19 when he declares, “I watch your fine ankles as you walk / ahead of me in airports and I always listen / for your voice

when we float in the cool / slate-blue waves" (14-17). Love steadies him when he waivers and grounds him in unfamiliar territory; without her he would be lost. Yet despite the seriousness of his emotions, McClure manages to lighten the mood, "each day it is the same you, Dear Being / (always in a different costume) / and it is a privilege to be here, hearing your laugh" (#23, 20-22). Playful lines such as these prevent the sequence from become overly sentimental.

A tone of gratitude also permeates the sequence. "Sometimes you must show me / silver clouds and the smell of dark dirt" (#4, 17-18). He has learned as much from his beloved as he has from nature. The dirt not only references his wife's occupation as a sculptor, along with the clouds it also suggests that she reminds him not to overlook the world's simple miracles. She has shown him what it is to live. The final lines of poem 33 echo the idea, "Dear Being, I am thrilled / to be with you while the auras and zigzags and flashes / spring from us / and into us, and through us. / Where we are there is no greater density / OF RICHES / than the passing experience, / rippling into nowhere" (16-22). McClure skillfully captures the transmission of energy that is shared by a couple that is deeply in love, and celebrates the magnitude of the moment. Despite the crises of aging, war, and destruction of the planet, the poet is liberated by the richness that profound love affords. A corollary is the appreciation he feels regarding his deepened Buddhist sensibilities, as his wife encouraged and nurtured a practice of regular sitting. "After zazen, sitting on the black cushions, / your wise face invents endless love in me" specifically references the discipline that she has helped foster (#24, 19-20). Without her presence the poet's life might not be as centered as it is, and McClure is truly grateful for Amy's spiritual guidance.

Ultimately, "Dear Being" is a profound love poem; a collection of tiny love letters. Like the atoms that comprise both microscopic elements and the galaxies at the furthest corners of the universe, McClure's love knows no bounds, and it infiltrates all aspects of the sequence. Poem 21 is noteworthy as being the sequence's most densely romantic. "YOU / ARE / THE / LAWS / THAT I WANT / to flow like water / over spongy moss / and like mercury over a wall of garnets / and yet you are solid flesh" (4-12). Like a river's continuous flow, the spirit of his muse connects with all things and penetrates the poet's being. McClure is the thriving moss absorbing his beloved's saturating affection. He acknowledges that despite being meat, we are spiritual beings in physical bodies. The poem tenderly continues, "delicate and pale and sleepy in the morning, / YOUR SOUL FILLS YOUR EYES" (13-14), capturing another romantic

moment of spiritual bonding. The image is deeply personal, but it represents a universal one that everyone can identify with. Feelings evoked in the moment inspire the next lines, “the pain of loving you / is almost more than I can bear / and I think I will melt in a hundred emotions” (15-17), and the reader is right there with the couple experiencing the uninhibited passion of the moment. Predictably, it is nature—a bird outside the window—that gives the poet and the reader a break from the intensity, but attention quickly returns to the muse, “HOW / HARD THIS / IS, DEAR BEING” (20-21). These lines lend themselves to different interpretations. What is so difficult? Knowing that the moment and their lives together will end some day? Is it the pain of loving someone that is mentioned earlier? McClure would probably argue that it is not the meaning that is important, but that we experience his confusion about the magic of love. Next, the poem takes another quick turn, “all talk of consciousness is nothing / compared to this” (23-24). The torment of the previous lines is transformed into redemptive awareness; rather than over-thinking, the poet savors the sanctity of the moment. Experience—feeling, loving, and living in the moment—is more valuable than contemplation. While this is a general truth, it is also a comment about his work, which is by in large concerned with consciousness. McClure realizes that in the long run experience itself is the key to existence, trumping thought and philosophizing. The poem finishes with the line, “the anguish of age is not speakable” (25). The stark reality that life as he knows it—with its myriad of experiences, romantic passion, and fulfilling work—will end troubles him. Yet, the sheer intensity of emotion that has been invested in the poem leaves the reader feeling that the fate of mankind, though tormenting, is bearable; devotion and passion supersede the fear of death.

X. Awakened

Sequenced first, roughly halfway (number 20), and last, three poems involving a photo booth function as bookends, with a reminder in the middle, that unite “Dear Being’s” thirty-seven compositions. Each one sketches a strip of four photos, and touches on McClure’s major themes and overall mindset. In poem 1 the poet’s initial self-assessment as “an old man with a handsome face” (8) juxtaposes with the mirror’s reflection when he steps into the booth: “a dog with jowls, a silver fox, / an eagle in the whirlpool” (11-12). The dog image jars with “handsome,” but it also implies loyalty and guardianship. The fox and eagle allusions suggest cunning, intelligence, power,

and grace. Next, the four shots are described. The first is a fairly objective description: "a sincere man with white hair and eyebrows" (13). The second portrait's "eyes / looking up into science fiction in his forehead" (15-16) conveys McClure's interest in scientific thought and rationality. In the fourth the poet is "fully alert: JUST AS I ALWAYS AM, / A SUICIDAL CHILD IN LOVE WITH EXPERIENCE / RISKING ALL TO BE ONLY WITH YOU / as the dragon world with its hundred eyes passes" (18-21). Here, McClure projects an awakened self and hints at the wisdom he has attained via maturity, Buddhist sensibilities, and finding profound love.

In poem 20, a nighttime garden's intricate aromas and blotches of darkness and color merge into the photo booth's flashbulb-induced "SPOTS IN FRONT / of [his] eyes" (9-10). A frame-by-frame assessment is difficult to discern here, as the poem's final six sentences merge the descriptions of the four snapshots. After objectively detailing a freckled old man who has difficulty recalling his youth the final sentences present a more subjective slant. The sneer of his past is now masked by a coy expression, indicating that he has mellowed over the years. The white-haired eagle resembles the image in the first poem. The poignant final lines, "there is the faintest / bruise of wisdom in the bags / under my silver-ringed, dark irises" (19-21), align with the poet's earlier notion that advanced age and his experiences have awakened him. The word "bruise" implies that sapience is not easily won, but born from crises and the school of hard knocks.

The sequence's final poem also begins with an image of nature—an ocean sunset—before presenting "RIGHT HERE, / right now ... a new strip / of four head shots" (#37, 4-6) that serves as a forthright self-assessment of the moment. The first two photos combine ordinary perceptions with subjective comparisons: "I'm an old man with his face as crazed as Clint Eastwood's. / Then I'm posed with a half-smile like serious, worn-out Tarzan" (7-8). The disparate pop icons indicate wildness and determination—Eastwood's rebellious heroes and the untamed, primeval spirit of the jungle-man—and McClure identifies with both. In the third portrait his chin is "raised forward in mock contempt" (9), indicating the poet's assured self-confidence as well as his disdain for authority and the status quo. The final head shot, "looking up, Dark-eyed / through the brows" (11-12), recalls the contemplative, scholarly mood of the opening poem's second photo. These photos present McClure as he sees himself.

Fittingly, the latter half shifts focus to the muse; this is her poem sequence after all. "Dear Being, who else but you could love me / as you love?" (13-14). Once again,

McClure's heartfelt appreciation powers the verse. With her by his side, the pain of the past and the anguish of age fade. The crucifixion image has been replaced by one of redemption; the thorns have dissolved. "Now that I stand with you the thorns drop / from my side, and we often sit with crossed legs / in morning light in the midst of gift orchids / and the smell of incense" (16-19). She is an essential component in his life; the blossom that radiates natural beauty and the sweet perfume that focuses his attention on the minute particulars. The final lines celebrate their everlasting love; "Dear Being, / there is nothing like you in the space / of emptiness / that follows the last out-breathing" (19-22). The literal reference is to the practice of sitting, but more profoundly to the belief that she will always be with him, and within him, even after their final breaths. Nothing can break the bond that they have forged, and this knowledge fully liberates McClure and supersedes any despair that he may have.

Clearly, McClure credits his awakened state to a fulfilling, late-life love affair, yet his spiritual sensibilities, mindfulness of the natural world, and lifetime of experiences have also been essential components in the transformation. The wisdom of his years has cultivated an understanding that the multiple facets of his life, and all the disparate elements in the universe, are interdependent, and he celebrates the harmony that results from these complex relationships. McClure never shies away from the modern world's challenges—our disregard for nature and its unending wars—nor his own—aging and mortality—yet he taps into the positive energy that surrounds him, enabling him to rise above the shortcomings and achieve serenity. Moreover, writing poetry also serves to alchemize despair into artistic work of beauty, thereby contributing to his liberation.

McClure believes that "a poem is a porthole of consciousness and experience" (*Mysteriosos ix*), and "Dear Being" succeeds in this respect because it offers a candid glimpse of the poet's soul. Due to his heightened sensory perception and skill at capturing moments in time, the reader truly is able to experience the depth and range of McClure's emotions. The poet's use of projective verse and non-linear associations capture the process of memory, and put into practice the idea of interconnectivity; his poems are living examples of his Buddhist sensibilities. Via the writing process the poet discovers his place in the universe, and the reader is invited on the journey to see things as he perceives them, to feel things as he does, and hopefully along the way, to gain some of the insight that McClure has gained. The poems themselves are tools of liberation; the lines and stanzas are nuggets of wisdom, Dharma transmissions. Like

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any important work of art, "Dear Being" is "free in time and place, and exists[s] in the oneness of everything" (*Mysteriosos* ix); it is proportionless. Undoubtedly, the same applies to Michael McClure.

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