

Ordinary Time

by Gil McElroy

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Reviewed by rob mclennan

As Lightning

In
the beginning, my
front legs so much
as string
& mister-knit
stories.

The points became
rifles, such a posture
that was tactical – nothing walled-
in by destiny – that
the network of rememberings became
a thing in the veins.

& so here
we are, practising
latitudes. (110)

Ordinary Time is the fourth title in Colbourne, Ontario poet, writer and curator Gil McElroy's ongoing poetic project, following up his previous trade poetry collections with the same publisher – *Last Scattering Surfaces* (2007), *NonZero Definitions* (2004) and *Dream Pool Essays* (2001). McElroy's publishing history is a bit deceptive, given that his work appeared in journals, anthologies and chapbooks for some three decades before Karl Siegler at Talonbooks took a look at his work and became the first trade publisher to actually commit to publishing McElroy's writing. Still, anyone with passing knowledge of McElroy's previous work might start noticing a series of patterns emerging, from the extended sequences, the abstract punctuations of time and geography, to poems on comets, constellations and other cosmic bodies. Also, there's the sequence that has run through all his trade collections so far: "Some Julian Days," an ongoing series of poems in a "day book" style titled using the days of the Julian Calendar, such as the poem "2448263." It would seem as though, for McElroy, the concept of the "day book" is firmly placed within the abstract, holding in all moments concurrently. Time itself is the only constant here.

A rather
odd mist up here. Or
I could simply be
out of landscape.

Shadows pass
in the bright space behind
things.

The geographical
happens, my shoes proof
of ground. (34)

Ordinary Time is made up of the sequences “Chain Home,” “Some Julian Days,” “Ordinary Time (9 Propers)” and a final section of shorter poems, “Imaginary Time.” The first section, “Chain Home,” references the Cold War “DEW (Distant Early Warning) line” that ran across northern parts of Canada, a radar tracking system designed to detect potential Soviet invaders, but on McElroy’s upbringing as an army brat, linking connection to connection back to a place he might have considered, if only briefly, home. In ten sketches, each with footnotes, McElroy writes out critical portraits of a technology born of fear and misused nationalisms, and maintained by duty. McElroy’s poetry is rife with detail, physical attention and a complex sense of time and space, holding concepts so large they can only be contained in such small spaces, halting phrases and broken turns.

White Alice

The white
was scattered. It
was scattered to standards
& line-of-sight.

It
was connected – in some cases
was used.

It
was conceived,
for example, was
installed, was
designed, was
leased, was de-
activated, though
still beating.

Names
were used. (It
was possible.) Each one
was remote. Some
were far. Some
were required. Some
were sometimes connected,
disrupting hearts.

Having
& meaning
both. (18) 

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