

*Conflict*

by Christine McNair

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Reviewed by rob mclennan

**MEND**

I can hold back heaven for half  
a day, maybe more. I can hold back

hell for one full week, a month at most,  
the days in the calendar clicking.

I can hold back my heart for half a year,  
for one full year, for two, for three –

I can stop the clocks and burn the books,  
forget my name and forget yours.

Here – take this scarf and take this glove,  
take this and this and this and this.

But let me stitch you back together,  
just let me kiss it better,

let me find the seam and close it. (20)

Never marry a poet, I've heard. And then, there are the double warnings about writers who attach themselves romantically to other writers, citing a number of conflicts, including the obvious question of household competition. Certainly, a number of literary couples have made it work, from Patrick Lane and Lorna Crozier, Forrest Gander and C.D. Wright, Noah Eli Gordon and Sommer Browning, Andrew Faulker and Leigh Nash, Anne Stone and Wayne Compton, Kim Maltman and Roo Borson, to Stephen Cain and Sharon Harris. But still: how does anyone write about their partner's work without bias? Perhaps it can't be done. Does Gordon write of Browning's work, or Harris of Cain's? Not that I've been aware of, although Smaro Kamboureli wrote extensively about Robert Kroetsch's work in her *On the Edge of Genre: The Contemporary Canadian Long Poem* (University of Toronto Press, 1991).

Reader, I must tell you: I married Christine McNair. But for the purpose of this, does it matter?

**CONFLICT**

black heart  
black retreat > delete

catastrophic quixotic  
blank angus beef and  
bad punctuation

sword swaddled  
valkyrie forge

for sure there is  
a lessening

guilt does not keep  
caresses maw

don't think I but  
I and I and I and I

from pleasure boat  
to never-never land

from stale joke to  
clipped chick beaks

from buried books  
to lost citations

the sharp of no

white flag gulps  
territory trenches

*Conflict*, Christine McNair's first trade poetry collection, works through and explores exactly what it suggests, writing of the conflicts between individuals through "bad communication," and a more immediate tension between restraint and release that infuses itself throughout the text. This is not merely an occasional conflict of ideas or perspectives, but of the words themselves, forced by the author into small and sometimes uncomfortable spaces. McNair has been referred to as a "language poet" more than a few times, and the label appears problematic, if not reductive, and possibly even deceptive. The further time elapses from the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets of the 1970s, the more difficult it is to know what the term "language poet" actually means in a discussion of contemporary work, apart from possibly (and more often) referring to the opposite of someone who composes more of a straight narrative and/or metaphor-driven lyric.

In a review on the *Literary Aficionado* website (posted July 17, 2012), Grady Harp refers to McNair as a "sorceress of language" and "a one-woman fireworks spectacle." Certainly, McNair's is a high level of language, engaging a rich and wide vocabulary and a spirited syntax, and she often reworks and pilfers ("cannibalizes," as she's said before) her own texts to create new works. In an interview conducted by Vancouver poet Kevin Spent (posted April 9, 2011), she says:

My method of work produces a massive swell of a document. I write about two hundred pages of raw notes, lines, sequences, and abbreviations for a full manuscript. I write poems out of this soup, pulling lines, cannibalizing longer pieces, and cutting things to the quick. I

try to skim off dull words, predictable constructions, and clichés. It's primary that the lines sound right. The rhythm and the mouth feel of the poem is important to me. My typographic leanings means I spend time balancing the lines visually as well as acoustically.

I leave my first draft of a poem alone for a week or so then test its mettle. Because I start with half-processed lines that I translate into finished pieces, my process of revision is partially built into my method of writing. I'm adjusting lines written in the past to flex and fit the contours of the poem. This often means that my poems tend not to be revised heavily once complete. Weak lambs are removed from the flock wholesale. Sometimes I would rather push away an abortive attempt than salvage it. These might be cannibalised for other work. A line that I wrote ten years ago goes into the vast gooey mess of my mass raw notes file and might nose its way into now. I don't take any line as sacred. Everything is up for butchery.

McNair has a way of wrestling words into shape, and she is interested in working with collision and sound, something she also explored through her participation in jwcurry's *Messagio Galore*, performing in Messagios VI through VIII.

I'm fascinated by this compositional process, so foreign from mine that it baffles, pulling and pushing words from a mass into various shapes. Why does even the process appear to be fraught with turmoil? Even the epigraph from Robert Kroetsch, one of four that open the collection, writes: "but I live by a kind of resistance" (from *The Sad Phoenician*). There is a resistance to settle, a resistance to uncritically allow or to follow, a resistance to be afraid of the risks.

#### PALEOGRAPHY

mistook misread I am practically  
illegible feather flint flight drunk  
spun out in dizzy orbits the complex  
addition and subtraction division

out of pulp paper a brittle baked  
stubbornness: words repeat turn  
crosswise and up/down inklings  
that won't wash no matter how  
much club soda you pour over

you should know your bones  
are made of water you should  
know you are an erosive body  
buffered sun burnt satellite

ligatures sucked from marrow  
the lift of ascender evolves  
passive fortune all my double  
luck cookies or pallid goodness

each blue minus me is a hand  
is a barge is a reckoning (79)

Throughout the spring and the summer, we sat early evenings on the back deck of our third-storey walk-up with glasses of wine. We discussed many things, including writing, as I attempted to slowly discern how she works, hoping to understand the nuts and the bolts of it. In bursts, it would seem, much the way my own projects progress, but with an entirely different method of composition.

In *Conflict*, she constructs a poem out of her own Facebook statuses, an accumulation of phrases in a single multiple-page flow working backwards through time, as she discusses in her interview with Cassie Leigh (posted June 15, 2012):

The time machine pieces work backwards through time and the St. Millay quote was a status I used on Facebook at some mid-point during the backwards slewing through statae. I liked ending the first part of the time machine at this point because it extends the tenuous fragile feel of these lines we push out into space as 'us'. The line for me is about a kind of rebellious beauty tied into submission. I have an affinity for this kind of resistant flip. We are all so beautifully finite; despite what some people think. But how wicked and wonderful in the burning.

*Conflict* is a book that risks much, personally and otherwise, between methodical approach and an eye on pulling apart meaning, style and syntax. The poems are physical, forcing a comprehension of the self and the world, and the relationships between. McNair isn't afraid of repetition, collision, as she says further in the interview with Spenst:

I'm more conscious of repetition within a larger collection or similarities in format. Generally speaking, I tend not to write single poems so my experience of editing involves working with a clump of poems, if not a full mound. I tend to repeat words when working through a project as though I'm underlining the point and that gets stripped away in the revision process. There's a larger structural framework that I'm trying to balance in a series of poems. An architecture. [...] I tend to be sensitive to the visual balance of the poem on the page and become frustrated when poets don't take full advantage of how poems can be subtly nuanced by the careful distribution of type. Letters matter to me, type matters to me, space matters to me. It's a subtext to any poem on a page and to ignore the visual weight of a piece is to miss an opportunity. ♡

rob mclennan is the author of some twenty trade books of poetry, fiction and non-fiction. His most recent titles are the poetry collections *Songs for little sleep* (Obvious Epiphanies, 2012), *grief notes*: (BlazeVOX [books], 2012), *A (short) history of l.* (BuschekBooks, 2011), *Glengarry* (Talonbooks, 2011) and *kate street* (Moira, 2011), and a second novel, *missing persons* (2009). An editor and publisher, he runs above/ground press, Chaudiere Books (with Jennifer Mulligan), *The Garneau Review* ([ottawater.com/garneaureview](http://ottawater.com/garneaureview)), *seventeen seconds: a journal of poetry and poetics* ([ottawater.com/seventeenseconds](http://ottawater.com/seventeenseconds)) and the Ottawa poetry pdf annual *ottawater* ([ottawater.com](http://ottawater.com)), and he regularly posts reviews, essays, interviews and other notices at [robmclennan.blogspot.com](http://robmclennan.blogspot.com).

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