

## Stephen Brockwell's *The Real Made Up* and David McGimpsey's *Sitcom*

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How far can you go before you make your way around the circle, simply to meet up again on the other side? It's interesting that poetry collections by two vigorous contemporaries, Ottawa's Stephen Brockwell and Montreal's David McGimpsey, would not only appear during the same publishing season (fall 2007), but relate to each other in ways that their previous works did not. If it were two other poets, perhaps this wouldn't be worth noting; but Brockwell and McGimpsey met while both attending McGill University in Montreal in the early 1980s, and were not only aware of each other as poets, but quickly became close friends. As Brockwell, referencing his student days at McGill, said in an interview in the third issue of *ottawater*:

Among younger people, I was impressed by David McGimpsey. He was writing poems that anyone would recognize as McGimpsey poems in his first year of university. He moved on to Concordia, which was a drag for me, but I still read pretty much everything he publishes. I don't know what it meant to my writing at the time.

McGimpsey, too, references Brockwell in his own essay, "Sweet Poetry or Mystery Meat?" from *side/lines: a new Canadian poetics* (Toronto ON: Insomniac Press, 2002), talking about the importance of reading Brockwell's own earlier piece, "Empathy in Modern Verse" from *The Insecurity of Art: Essays on Poetics* (Montreal QC: Vehicule Press, 1982):

A long time ago, a dear friend of mine published an ambitious essay about the nature of empathy in modern verse; an essay which included many clear beliefs as to what poetry should be as well as one nifty translation of the German term *einfihlung*. I wrote lots of things in the margins of my friend's essay, offering my own self evident counter-poetics like the only thing a poet should do is write poems! But, what I never noted in all this shadow engagement was how jealous I was that my friend was already having his opinions on poetry published. A strange omission considering that that initial jealousy was probably the thing that most energized my response. Of course, the fact that upon seeing the word *einfihlung* I immediately started singing the word to the tune of Jethro Tull's "Aqualung" should have told me that I wasn't quite ready for such exposure and perhaps I'm still not.

Twenty-five years is a long time, and the two have certainly accomplished quite a lot as writers over the years, with Brockwell publishing four poetry collections—*The Wire in Fences* (Toronto ON: Balmuir Press, 1988), *Cometology* (Toronto ON: ECW Press, 2001), *Fruitfly Geographic* (Toronto ON: ECW Press, 2004) and *The Real Made Up* (Toronto ON: ECW Press, 2007)—and McGimpsey publishing a critical study of baseball writing, *Baseball: America's Pastime and Popular Culture* (Bloomington IN: Indiana University Press, 2000), the short story collection *Certifiable* (Toronto ON: Insomniac Press, 2004), and four poetry collections of his own—*Lardcake* (Toronto ON: ECW Press, 1996), *Dogboy* (Toronto ON: ECW Press, 1998), *Hamburger Valley, California* (Toronto ON: ECW Press, 2001) and *Sitcom* (Coach House Books, 2007). Just as McGimpsey has become an important part of the Montreal literary scene,

as writer, performer and writing teacher, so too has Stephen Brockwell in Ottawa, but a two plus hour drive apart. After years without any real interaction, new poetry collections by the two were even able to meet up again through editor Michael Holmes at ECW Press, who saw books by each through the press in 2001, allowing the two old friends to reacquaint, and launch together in Toronto, Ottawa and Montreal.

But all of this is background for the matter at hand. What these two new books have in common, more than most of what they've done previously, is the consideration of formal techniques, their engagement with wanting to twist and even subvert such forms, and their forays into "voice." One example of Brockwell's movement through voice is the creation of the character Karikura, working to softly chide, deride and otherwise give sage advice to the narrator of the book in a series of poems scattered throughout the collection.

### **Karikura Asks for Bread**

Karikura came to me and asked for bread.  
I said, "Karikura, I have ten dollars. Take it  
and buy yourself a decent breakfast."  
Karikura scolded me, "I do not want your money.  
I asked you for bread because the bread you make  
is not very good. If you do not make more,  
you will never make a loaf that anyone will eat."

For Stephen Brockwell, *The Real Made Up* is all *about* voice; the poems explore mimesis (writing art out of art) and imitation. As the back cover reads, "imitation is not a simple act of copying—at its best, imitation is accompanied by play, performance and re-enactment. Imitation is also a crucial human faculty—a talent at the heart of social being." What the two have in common, too, is in what reviewers and critics often miss, catching the humour and pop references of McGimpsey's poetry but missing the threads of classical reference and his work with the sonnet, and, for Brockwell, catching the classical reference and formal structures, but missing out on the serious play, and the *twisting* of form. Brockwell may work in forms the late Ottawa poet Diana Brebner, east coast poet George Murray and the Montreal formalists favour, but he so subtly subverts them, making his poems related to others composed by members of the Montreal formalists (including Carmine Starnino, Eric Ormsby and Michael Harris), but just as influenced by the works of Erin Mouré, jwcurry and Christopher Dewdney. When Brockwell launched *The Real Made Up* at the Ottawa international writers festival in October, 2007, he talked about how the collection is "made up" of a series of monologues, and "imitation" poems, as well as poems made through procedures, including pieces put through voice recognition and translation software. As he said at the time, he was composing poems "made through the things it did not understand." In a recent interview on the online *Sentinel Poetry*, conducted by Amatoritsero Ede, Brockwell said, "I'm hoping to erase all trace of influence by imitating everything."

### **Antique Silver Box**

I've begun to collect your skin. I brush

the sheets to keep the mites from finding it  
in their blind hunger. I gather the silk  
from the towel after your morning shower  
and collect the constellations of stardust  
fallen on the shoulders of your black wool  
sweater. Filling an antique silver box  
with the white dust of you is not as strange  
as it may seem. Snapshots of you have faded  
under my fingers. The hotel telephone  
is perfumed by the breaths of other mouths.  
The memory of your voice rings in the mind  
not in the ear. I carry these drops of you.  
Their scent is faint. They are too small to hold.

Compare this use of voice by Brockwell with David McGimpsey's poem "Voice-Over," which begins:

Scheduled guests on The Tony Danza Show  
stay at the luxurious downtown Omni,  
where one can listen to quivering ghosts  
from the prestigious Lowell family  
as they passive-aggressively argue  
about the 'Roman fate of America.'  
Given established public obsession  
with non-Danza-related materials,  
guests will be encouraged to cannonball  
to their hearts' content in a swimming pool  
located on the luxurious rooftop  
of the Omni's sister hotel, the Brase,  
part of the Epic Inns and Suites chain.  
Transportation is provided by Steelrick,  
the world's only line of rickshaws made from  
one-hundred-per-cent-non-union steel beams.

It's interesting how McGimpsey's wry, omniscient, almost impersonal voice is fused with irony, whereas Brockwell's use of voice in his piece, bound in character, is used as a sort of dramatic monologue. Talking about *The Real Made Up* (then still in manuscript) in the same interview with Ede, Brockwell furthered the idea of voice in his poems:

The first part of it is a dicey experiment that risks issues of believability and vocal accuracy. The first section asks a question about poetry as a register for the voice, personal history and the poet (definitely not me) as voyeur. A poet/oral historian (I don't know if you've read any of Barry Broadfoot's oral histories) tries to get people to meditate on how they live in and through the world of things – their possessions mostly. There's a personality to this scribe: he has an inane desire for accuracy and completeness despite the discomfort of his interviewees. So you have to question his representation,

although I'd bet that one is tempted not to because most of these people seem pretty real (and, of course, some of them are). A few of the pieces are actual transcriptions. It was important for me to verify what my ear was hearing as I listened to relatives and people in the neighbourhood. [...] The challenge and the question for the poetry is this: is this kind of poetic transcription or voice portraiture possible and meaningful and, if so, what kind of meaning results?

For Brockwell, his poetry collections all seem to be made up of poems that extend and even compound his previous themes, structures and concerns, even going back as far as his first collection from the late 1980s, such as this poem from the new collection, exploring the voice of an Eastern Ontario Scottish-decent farmer:

### **Bill McGillivray's Cap**

I may not yet be  
fifty but the field  
underneath this cap's  
not growing taller.  
I can't imagine  
going to the barn  
without it. Someone  
would have to sneak  
into the shed and  
steal it from the nail  
it's hung on since Dad  
brought it home for me  
from Illinois before  
I'd forget to  
put it on or take it off.  
If it weren't there?  
I'd stand as dumb  
as a November field.  
I've had this John Deere  
cap near thirty years.  
It wasn't the last thing  
he brought me home.  
It was the only thing  
he brought me home.

Raised in Montreal by parents that included a mother from eastern Ontario's Glengarry County (a MacRae), much of his first poetry collection, *The Wire in Fences*, was shaped by the summers he spent on her family property in the 1960s and 1970s, an area his mother eventually retired to, and where numerous of their extended family still reside. This is a county made up of numerous poems over the past twenty or thirty years, by various resident and non-resident poets including Henry Beissel, Nicholas Lea, Gary Geddes, Jan Zwicky, Jesse Patrick Ferguson, Margaret Christakos, David W. McFadden, myself, and, perhaps more famously, Cornwall-raised Don

McKay, who still spends part of each year at the McKay family cabin near Williamstown. Still, unlike some of the locally-crafted verse, Brockwell's poems include no pastoral pining for the far-flung Glens, or vague presumptions of the "Scottish heart," but are made up of real living and observation. Considering his recent talk of writing poems that explore "voice," it becomes interesting, then, to compare the poem "Bill McGillivray's Cap" from *The Real Made Up* with the poem "Don MacRae" from *The Wire in Fences*, just to see how far back his interest in voice goes.

### **Don MacRae**

(1907 – 1983)

"What's come will again. Anyhow,  
although my damn hip's almost shot,  
I dust with a damp cloth  
and in the domes of water beads  
scattered on the coffee table,  
see a white moth reflected,  
wings punching the air over my sweater.

For lunch,  
beer and fish and chips on a tray.  
There's rust under the tray's painted flowers.

A drop of brew for my throat,  
as much water for the flowers.  
Earth sticks to my fingertips.

I wish I could walk to the bush without a cane.  
I could see snow settle on the cedars,  
rabbits with high ears.

As part of his inclusion in the poetry anthology *Sounds New* (1990), this is what Brockwell wrote as his statement on those early poems:

I try to write poems that convey a reconciliation of idea and emotion that comes from a detailed observation of the external and internal world. For instance, a geometric object is seen as a representation of both scientific and human fecundity. Reflections of human experience are implied by the treatment of farm animals. An attempt is made to transcribe the events of a dream without interpretation while preserving the latent emotional content of the dream. The foregoing statements are, however, annoyingly precise. They are afterthoughts, the observations of words created by a process that is seldom described as it is performed. Although I often compile pages of notes for a poem before actually writing, a fortunate association between words is as likely to catalyze the poem as are those months of research and note collection. I pursue a logical process toward an

illogical event: the writing of the first word. I hope that my writing also embodies a small part of *that* contradiction.

What makes *The Real Made Up* work as much as anything is the range of formal structures throughout the collection, as either writer or editor (or both) made the wise decision to mix up the sections that Brockwell described in his interview with Ede, making this a complete book instead of a book spliced together as sections. In many ways, this is perhaps the most complete unit of composition Brockwell has achieved to date. For a poet who has spent years claiming that he writes poems, not books, *The Real Made Up* is something that actually manages to contradict that statement, and makes this work into something far deeper.

### **Hunt (Wallace Stevens in the Kootenays)**

Here the shagged pines not of Connecticut,  
here the huntsmen and their fireside dances,

their disembodied shadows on the rocks  
where granite glints as if a mirror for each spark.

There is no silver stream but black, the moon  
behind the pines and craggy peaks, stars

hidden by slow-moving clouds, the stream reflects  
no light, it is a harp of rock and water playing

the chatter of a crowded marketplace,  
or of the wolf packs hunting in the dark,

or of cicadas in the heat of summer,  
which are each the same chattering

tuned by the stream.

Writing a collection of soliloquies and sonnets based on the works of his literary heroes, Montreal poet, fiction and critical writer David McGimpsey's poems bring in classical reference from Greek literature and Shakespeare, mixed in with the most *banal* (and therefore, somehow, the most ubiquitous) of popular culture, whether scenes from the sitcom *Joey*, or Lindsay Lohan. It's been said for years that if Toronto writer Stuart Ross was an American writer, he would be famous by now; I think the same thing could easily be said of McGimpsey (given the CanLit leanings toward literary snobbery against such, as opposed to some of our southern counterparts), especially for what he accomplishes in *Sitcom*.

### **Precious**

Precious as the love between a man  
and either Betty or Veronica,

sweet as spending the night in a van  
with a bottle of no-name Goldshlager.  
Into the thicket the gnatcatchers go,  
grey winged with high-pitched mating calls;  
I take you to my parents' bungalow  
after three Big Macs at the East Side Mall.  
Sweet as toffee muffin without the muffin,  
gentle as a less-howly howler monkey,  
soft as soft-serve, cute as a postcard puffin  
riding the back of a ceramic donkey.  
Mom's on meth and Dad's left for Vancouver,  
so let's skip school and love one another.

McGimpsey's pop references are never as surface as they might appear to the casual reader, and can even be quite deceptive, as any poem talking about exactly what it claims, and exactly not, concurrently. For all his talk of fast food and large American pop standards, his classical reference is still the thread that pulls it together, as he writes in "Sweet Poetry or Mystery Meat?":

I don't write poetry for respectable reasons. By that, I don't mean to suggest I'm some kind of rebel, writing things so beyond the norm that traditional niceties and conventional rewards leave me unimpressed. On the contrary: whatever hokey, half-baked, self-aggrandizing, obscuring, mythologizing, self-defeating, daydreaming, flaky, effacing, please-love-me, log-rolling, "I'd like to thank the Governor General" sins that are alleged to plague poets, I'll cop to those same sins and more. I guess what I mean is that I'm still not entirely sure why I write poetry. After a long time writing the stuff, some days it doesn't feel worth it, some days it still kind of feels too personal to talk about. Though, unfortunately for my friends, some days it's all I can talk about. I agree with Tennyson when he famously said "I sometimes hold it a sin / To put in words the grief I feel" (191) but, as with so many sins, I haven't let guilt stop me.

Poetry is still wonderful, isn't it?

Unlike much of his previous work, the formal threads and twists become more prevalent in the deceptively-titled *Sitcom*, as McGimpsey, whose first poems included a series of sonnets about Batman, somehow comes back full-circle. Reviewing McGimpsey's *Hamburger Valley, California* in *Books in Canada*, Robert Moore wrote:

Most of these poems stage scenes of either psychic or literal exile in which the speaker addresses the threats of depthlessness and dispossession. In counterpoint to the notoriously 'disappeared' sense of history that happened with the advent of the postmodern, McGimpsey offers moments from a personal history, the locus of which is adolescence, an adolescence prolonged into early adulthood. [...] The weakness of the book is the degree of its complicity with the dreck it derides. Unhappily for a book of this length, irony has serious limitations as either a mode of resistance (against our culture's fetishization of celebrity, for example) or as a means of valorizing some potentially

redemptive alternative reading of the self in the world. Several years ago in *Boxed In*, his book on television, H. Crispin Miller coined a marvelous term, pace Kierkegaard, for the way in which irony can become a debilitating end in itself: “hipness unto death.” Irony, we’re all coming to discover in the Age of Irony, is the song of the prisoner who’s come to love his cage.

What I admire about David McGimpsey’s writing is the way he gives equal weight to both high and low culture, something rarely done so well in Canadian writing generally, and Canadian poetry specifically, which makes Moore’s complaints miss the mark entirely. He complains about McGimpsey achieving what he sets out to do, and then derides its “complicity,” as well as confusing “narrator” with “author” (these are not “teenage confessions” that McGimpsey is writing). Are McGimpsey’s poems all sad pieces by someone who can’t stop watching television and picking up trashy tabloids? Hardly. What makes McGimpsey’s poems, in part, is his refusal to separate two aspects of our cultural lives as North Americans—able to read intelligent writing and trashy tabloids without shame or contradiction. How many novelists read *Proust* but still admit to watching *Lost*? One over the other does not specifically make us smarter or stupider, but it is in the *engagement* (both critically and uncritically) of such that elevates, and the combination, at least, that propels McGimpsey’s aesthetic, in both considerations of form and of content.

#### 14 Episodes

Joey discovers a chimp wearing pants.  
Joey tells Sara he believes in Jesus Christ.  
Joey tells Sara he ‘overstated’ his faith.  
Joey’s sister Gina considers death.  
Gina calls Sara ‘too superficial.’  
Gina discovers Joey’s secret stash.  
Gina and Sara go a bit too far.  
Gina tells Joey the chimp has cancer.  
Sara pretends to be a Scottish nurse.  
Sara and Joey’s romance hits a snag.  
Sara judges a super-hunk pageant.  
Sara thinks Joey is going to hell.  
Joey prays for the soul of Sir Chimpy.  
Joey tells Gina he’s found a new hope.

It’s been said before that humour in Canadian poetry, or even fiction, is almost not allowed, and writers like McGimpsey, Stuart Ross, Nathaniel G. Moore and Jon Paul Fiorentino often get typecast and even *dismissed* for their humour, and very little else in their writing gets acknowledged or noticed. *Sitcom*, unlike his previous “trilogy” of poetry collections, weaves both sides of his work together in a far deeper and far more effective way, managing humour and depth in a way his previous writing worked toward, but hadn’t yet perfected at the same level. Just as Brockwell works to temper his seriousness with serious play, McGimpsey takes his sense of humour very seriously. As he said to Fiorentino during an interview published in *The Danforth Review*,

The Canadian model of poetry does not account for humor as much as American models do and one can feel this shouldn't be so, given Canadian success in television comedy, but that's what readers of Canadian Literature actually buy. They have been given the choice of urban, hip and funny but they generally prefer rural, earnest and serious. "Thank you Russell Smith, that's fine, but I'm sticking with Carol Shields." But, that earnest brand isn't everything. I don't think it's lonely at all to be thought of as a funny writer. Far from it. I see that as a great compliment and something that has brought much sympathetic company to me throughout my career. I'm always amazed and grateful for the exposure my work has received outside of traditional circles and I'm pretty certain this interest is not just because my thoughts on the smack of sea salt on Vancouver Island are so heartbreaking.

Writing of McGimpsey's poem "KoKo" (from his first collection *Lardcake*) for *Arc Poetry Magazine*'s "how poems work" feature, Alessandro Porco wrote:

Each of David McGimpsey's first three collections of poetry—*Lardcake*, *dogboy*, and *Hamburger Valley, California*—includes installments in what are commonly referred to as his "chubby sonnets." Sixteen-lines in length; divided equally into four four-line stanzas; picaresque in tone—the poems carefully locate and straddle pathos and bathos, sentimentality and irony. Part character, part caricature, the speaker is, to borrow from "KoKo," "one of the great defectives," a resident of Loserville, described by McGimpsey elsewhere as the "demented but proud and gated community / that will not let the winners in." He is perhaps most-aptly described as a warm-hearted Travis Bickle, or, inversely, a cold-hearted Quixote.

In his essay "Sweet Poetry or Mystery Meat?", published in *Side/lines: A New Canadian Poetics*, McGimpsey describes growing up "loving the Confessional poets, then adoring Tennyson and Yeats, and I habitually listen to Country & Western music [...] I value poetry that commemorates emotional experience through an accultured, personal sensibility" (168). His "accultured, personal sensibility" includes "the prosaic aspects of our culture (the malls, the khaki pants, the concert you thought would change your life, the TV shows, the baloney and the bologna, the dieting)," and he "[sees] into them our most hopeful and tragic selves." In that last point, McGimpsey echoes Yeats, who writes, "We that look on but laugh in tragic joy" ("The Gyres" 8). And *laugh* we do.

And certainly we laugh; McGimpsey's poems are hilarious, and perhaps the few pieces fully loved by both poetry readers and non-readers alike (he has even moved into forays of stand-up comedy over the past year or two). Are these two writers simply two sides of some otherwise coin?

### **CanPo**

O, bubbly seal, why do you collect leaves?  
Do you know how I promised my mother  
I'd take her to see the Ice Capades?

Don't cry for me, my sweet Shatner,  
it's just you at me (and maybe Shatner).  
Don't you know I told most of my students  
how happy I am to be a poet?  
So happy! I'm almost in heaven  
and I'm throwing Mardi Gras beads  
to Elisha Cuthbert and there's confession  
in the morning. O, something-something loon,  
do you think I could ever forget  
the greatest people in the whole country:  
the Tampa Bay Buccaneers' grounds crew?

For both poets, their new collections revel in the ideas of deliberate creation through the admission of arbitrary forms, with poems being made even as they are found. Even their titles cohere into something "created," out of the fragments of what is often called "real life," from David McGimpsey's situation comedy to Brockwell's mimesis, and revealing just how much even a found artwork is constructed by both author and reader. Still, I will leave the last words to Brockwell, from a small poem out of his *The Real Made Up*:

### **Randomized Oxford Exploration 3**

Spare mercury  
for the snob,  
the maid,  
the skier.  
Respect  
the marvel  
of the concubine's  
undulations.

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