

On *Preparations for Search*



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A friend assures me that Joseph McElroy's chapbook, *Preparations for Search* (Small Anchor Press, Brooklyn, 2010), is the exact size of one of those booklets of elegant and translucent paper that one purchases for the purpose of *origami*. Which would mean that this is a text preformatted for folds, for imbrications, adumbrations, concealments. Which would mean that the text knows what it means to be excised from a former home (*Women and Men*). Which would mean that the anxious, anguished, *coastal* drawing on the front, is an accurate portrait of the contents of the text, which is *coastal* in the sense that it constitutes an outline of a shore but is otherwise impossible to measure. Which would mean that *Preparations for Search* is fractal, or infinitely subdivisible, as McElroy's sentences often are (for example: "The artist on the floor below who had a zodiac sign with breasts and limbs advertising horoscopes for artists at twenty-five dollars was standing in a maroon terrycloth robe in his doorway and nodded as I passed"), in which constructions at any point one might get arrested by the details and forget or set aside any larger purpose, as though larger purpose is less important than internal fractal subdivision; and yet, at the same time, I often think that McElroy is *dialectical*, which is to say

that he will make one utterance, and then, almost immediately, assert its quintessential opposite, almost as Plato does, in describing and mapping (as if in a *coastal* mood) the dialectical methodology of Socratic dialogue. In this regard, the outset of *Preparations for Search* is instructive: “It was only money, but it was quite a lot of money and I told him I felt I couldn’t let him have it. Enos said he could understand. I said what he did with the money was his business, but—eleven hundred dollars to pay a detective to track down someone Enos hadn’t seen since he was two? He looked me in the eye and asked if it was true that what he did with the money was his business. *What* money? I said, and he laughed and said didn’t I mean *whose* money?” Quintessential McElroy (and I will use *quintessential* here sort of the way that McElroy uses *vouchsafe* in *Preparations for Search*, that is, as a repetition that slowly unwinds into an ambiguity), really, because it establishes a premise, and a thematic field (money, knowledge, detection), but then undercuts the certainty of premise with linguistic precision, as if the language required to tell the story is more important than the story itself, which, in turn, is why McElroy continues to be an essential voice, and continues to be infinitely subdivisible and dialectical, because in him the story is less important than the language. The McElroy sentence is as few in all of American literature these days—singular, demanding, resistant, playful, outraged, recalcitrant, urbane, and *new*. Of interest in this case is that *Preparations for Search* gives evidence that a novel of phenomenal length (*Women and Men*), somehow still necessitated cutting, and that, therefore, there are unities and ideas of completion that have nothing to do with *length*, and which instead make the case that certain material has to go, and yet this material, whether germane to the narrative trajectory of the whole is still somehow, by virtue of the man’s style, breathtaking and electrifying, despite the fact that it reveals its vintage in details (telephones, answering machines, an absence of computers), and thus the excision is as invigorating as the most refreshing voice we are likely to encounter in the firmament of the present. Now, there is also the matter of the story of *Preparations for Search* has a particular *noir* aspect to it, it should be said, and yet as a reader who resolutely resists crime fiction of any kind (it’s about social control!) I am happy to report that the *noir* aspect is also dialectical, like much of what I know about *Women and Men*, from which it was salvaged, which itself

is dialectical from the title all the way into its density of chapters and paragraphs and sentences, and the dialectical quality of this rescued gem (*Preparations*) finds itself in the struggles *between* characters, which is to say that it is a story made of dialogue, and that the dialogue, especially between the narrator and his friend Enos (whose search for his father constitutes at least one possible interpretation of the word *search* as indicated in the title), and likewise in the exchanges between the narrator and the women of his life, Susan and Mary, amounts to bits of circuitry in an electrical diagram of *story*. Nothing, it is fair to say, gets resolved, if by resolved you mean that Enos locates his father, or, indeed, learns more about his father's bigamous relationship. Nor does the narrator figure out, in any definitive way, who gave Enos the money to hire Korn, the detective, although it is possible, in this story, that the narrator himself provided the funds. It is possible, in a way, that the narrator is Enos's own father, or that Korn is his father, or that there is no father at all. Many things are possible, though none of these possibilities, in truth, is exact in a demonstrable, naturalistic way. When we get to the next-to-last page, we come upon this: "Some time before dawn, a voice, Mary's, or my own, or maybe that of Karl Marx, came between me and some all-purpose person standing at great length squinting in a doorway, and the voice asked what I knew about the detective Korn, and this at once ushered away again all that residual business or daybreak dream or promise or whatever it was squinting in a doorway, that I had known I would vouchsafe when the time came to the right woman—who was obviously Mary." Now, *this* is a sentence, a sentence that undercuts its own existence, and does a few other pirouettes, with a most balletic confidence. The invocation or *incantation* of Marx has hovered in the background, in the alleged labor organizing of Enos's father, and it reminds us that there is never a McElroy story that doesn't have a political pretext, in this case a political pretext that is all but unstated throughout, though nonetheless pertinent for all that. Marx, the political theorist whose name always goes unspoken now, is not intruding here, and not haphazardly. One imagines, in a way, that McElroy made the decision to allow *Preparations for Search* out of his apartment, and into print, in part just because it has Marx at its heart—Marx's dialectical materialism, Marx's preoccupation with Hegel, Marx's radical idealism, and so on. And this could be true despite

the fact that *Preparations for Search* is also, as must inevitably be the case with McElroy, a bit of a commentary on narrative itself, and on the idea that a narrative is a sort of quest. In McElroy there is a tolerance of metafictional gestures, but also a total resistance, even a scoffing, at them. And why should it not be so? His sentences, like those quoted just above, are novelistic in themselves, with all their drama, conflict, reversals. McElroy has been a stealthy voice, a brilliant one, but one who has always evaded notoriety and achieved most of his significant accomplishment with a decided lack of interest in what is fashionable in literary discourse. That's what makes him last, and it's what makes *Preparations for Search* an engaging and paradoxical anti-narrative of detection and the war between the genders. And: you can fold its pages into the shape of the crane.