



Cold Comfort: Growing Up Cold War

Gil McElroy

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When his father died, award-winning poet and curator Gil McElroy was given a box of photographs that documented his father's military career. Beginning in the Second World War and continuing right through to the end of the Cold War, the senior McElroy staffed Canada's network of electronic defence, including the Distant Early Warning Line – a network of radar stations stretching along the Arctic coast from Alaska to Baffin Island. Established in the early 1950s, the DEW Line provided advance warning of an aircraft or missile attack. There, servicemen lived in isolated radar stations, watching surveillance screens for the telltale blips that threatened nuclear annihilation.

McElroy reflects on the sacrifices these men made, living away from their families for great lengths of time – for the “greater good” of protecting North American airspace and Western values.

At the same time, *Cold Comfort* follows McElroy's experience of growing up as an itinerant military brat, who moved from one posting to another, and the military family's attempts to hold together in the face of the father's absence. *Cold Comfort* also explores the utter enigma that was the author's father. Examining the contents of the box of photographs, image by image, McElroy attempts to come to terms with the mysterious photographer, a man better understood by his military compatriots than by his own family.

Further, *Cold Comfort* provides the backstory to McElroy's most recent collection of poems, *Ordinary Time*, which offers an unsettling history of the utter failures of these remote surveillance technologies to make "our" world either better known or reliably predictable.

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