Wesley McNair: Poet
Award-winning North Sutton man stakes out “the territory around us”

In 1976 Wesley McNair of North Sutton, the 1984 winner of the prestigious Devins Award for Poetry, had finished all the degree work he would ever do: a B.A. from Keene State in 1963, and an M.A. and an M. Litt. in 1965 and 1975 from Bread Loaf. He was about to leave for a year in Chile as a senior Fulbright lecturer in American studies. A former high school teacher, a professor at Colby-Sawyer College since 1968, McNair had been writing fiction, and then poetry, seriously since the mid-1960s. His poetry had appeared in many periodicals, including such reputable “little magazines” as Prairie Schooner and Poetry Northwest. Still, by 1976, McNair was uncertain of his talent and “at the crossroads,” as he put it. “I needed to have somebody tell me if my poems breathed, or if I was wasting my time,” he said. Some friends knew the distinguished editor and poet Donald Hall, who had recently returned to his family farm in Wilmot, and they offered to introduce McNair to Hall. It was to be the most important experience in McNair’s life as a poet. “I was sort of a prematurely aging fellow desperate,” McNair recalled. “I was very nervous about it. I met him and we talked a bit. I just sheepishly pulled this thing (a small batch of poems) out of my coat and dropped it on his kitchen table. He said he would look at it.”

“It turned out that he wrote me immediately. He’s that way anyway. So I went to see him again; we had some drinks and a really good time. He told me he was dazzled by my poetry. . . . I’m sure he knew I needed that. I figured I’d just been to Hollywood.”

Then later he wrote me a letter and said that he wanted to make sure I knew he was serious. That it wasn’t just the alcohol. He said that whenever I was ready with a full collection, he would take it to Harper & Row (where he was chief poetry consultant), McNair remembered.

When McNair returned from Chile with a full collection of poems, Hall did recommend the manuscript to Harper. But not, then, for a year in 1979 McNair entered what he calls a “long period of limbo.” His editor at Harper left for another company, and as a result the manuscript was not published. The manuscript—through several more revisions—was an unpublished finalist in the Pittsburgh Poetry Series contest. Then Carnegie-Mellon University wanted to publish it, but had to wait for delayed grant money. Through it all, Hall remained a friend and mentor. With Hall’s encouragement, McNair’s work was appearing now in the finest of places—Harvard Magazine, Poetry, the Atlantic. But McNair began loathing the process of publishing a book was only this last year, when Faces of Americans in 1835 won the Devins Award, that his work was fully recognized as the superb and original poetry that it is. That comes from too much translation, probably, so you get that voice that doesn’t seem to belong to the speaker at all. With Thomas King Frost, McNair is attracted to the tradition of the popular poet who speaks in the words and tones people use. “The poem shouldn’t be something you put a necktie on,” he said. “It should be something you put in your back pocket.”

Like each poem in it, Faces of Americans is a carefully formed book. It depicts a journey into both the poet’s and the nation’s past. As McNair explains, the book begins with “the narrator feeling dislodged, and then he moves backwards to try to find out more about the present. Finally, there’s a connection with this Rufus Porter figure who makes the tone of the book change and the reentry into the present possible. . . . There’s a kind of charitable vision toward the end of the book.”

What does the poet find on his journey to talk to us about? Above all he finds the continual disman-tling of our world, myths, and ideals by time and change. Such change may be represented by the monumental world as it whirrs past us in our cars, or it may be the consuming flames that “take the air like sails” as they destroy a barn in Enfield whose windows stare “into the space of another century,” or it may be the neighbor who eternally “redeems” his property by backhoe.

“The poem itself holds the world together,” McNair commented, “even as the world is coming apart. This gets to the idea finally of what form is poetry for, what it’s about. What form, and there’s a formlessness that’s teasing about the edges of the poem too.” McNair’s poems stand as a counterpoint against the erosions of man, death, decay. His movement into the personal and national past is a quest for the significant event that, once captured, makes the otherwise unretrievable past live again.

Early in his book the poet learns that the forces of time and dissolution are not merely out there, but in direct contact with oneself. In “Leaving the Country House to the Landlord, Five Years Later,” McNair recalls the experience of being turned out of a house his family loved. Even as his family packs and leaves, the landlord (here the destroyer) and his family are moving in and radically altering the landscape and house.

When he puts his chainsaw once into our shade tree, it twists and falls. Its branches look up startled from the ground.

Like a recurring dream, the poem gives the event a certain permanence and meaning.

And the dream goes on. It will not stop. I can’t awaken. We are still moving out of the old cape, in the front yard another tree has felled. It leans on one side like an exhausted fish.

This destruction of a personal idyll is no more avoidable than any other of the stern necessities of change and time.
Meanwhile, the landlord
drives in his baseball cap the calves
of the boy, how well they know
a motor . . .
and when he shouts
commands that drift sleepy as bubbles,
inaudible above the raging saw,
we both can hear them say.
"You are awake. And what you've dreamed
are your five gentle years."

There is a strong elegiac element in Mc
Nair's book—remembrances of people and things past, of loss and death. And it is his
sense of loss that sends the poet back in
time.

"M
EMORY IS WHAT creates the
identity of the individual, a region,
and also a nation," McNair said.
"The things we remember, determine who
we are. It is interesting to me to go back to
the things, as kind of hieroglyphs, out of
which my identity was created... then to
explore them and find out what they mean.
And as it is interesting on a personal level, it
is also interesting on a regional and national
level as well. I ended up examining the past
of a region which I could find in the pres
tent, and the past of a nation too in which
that region existed. It is a deliberate effort
to explore the way the event in the past
shapes the present."

On his journey, McNair discovered not
only the tragic, but the comic as well, parti
cularly as he examines old and new Amer
ican myths. In part two of his book, his
sense of humor is in full play. Take for ex
ample "Hair on Television":

On the soap opera the doctor
explains to the young woman with
cancer
that each day is beautiful.
Hair lifts from their heads
like clouds, like something to eat.
The hair of the married couple
giving in touch with their real
feelings
the hair of young people on the beach
drinking Cokes and falling in love.
And the man who took the laxative
and waters his garden
next day with the hose wets the hair
so dark and wavy even his grand
children are amazed.
and the woman who never dreamed
minipads
could be so convenient wears it.
For the hair is changing people's lives.
It is growing like wheat above the faces
of game show contestants . . .
and the news teams bringing all the
news faster
and faster, and the new breed of
cops . . .
proud to be among the literally mil
lions of Americans everywhere
who have tried the hair, compared the
hair, and will never go back
to life before the active, the caring,
the successful, the incredible hair.

McNair is equally capable of poking
fun at himself, as in "The Bald Spot," or all
of us and himself at the same time, as in
"The Thugs of Old Comics." The thugs
look up from their prison (as Superman
clears one more tall building), crying
"We're trapped!" and
thinking, like you, how it all gets down
to the same old shit: no fun, no dough, no
power to rise out of their bodies.

"It's easy to write gags," McNair said
of a certain kind of "wise acre poetry"
being written today. "But if the humor
doesn't have a good deal of complication, I
doubt it's worth using it. It has to go

(continued next page)
Mina Bell’s Cows

O where are Mina Bell’s cows who gave no milk and grazed on her dead husband’s farm?
Each day she walked with them into the field, loving their swayback demeanor more
than the quickness of any dog or chicken.
Each night she brought them grain in the dim barn, holding their breath in her hands.
O when the lightning struck Daisy and Bets,
her son dug such holes in the yard
She could not bear to watch him.
And when the baby, April, growing old
and wayward, fell down the hay chute,
Mina just sat in the kitchen, crying “Ape. Ape.”
as if she called all three cows,
her walled girls who never would come home.

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A Dream of Herman

for Diane

I was driving the old Dodge wagon
again, with Coke cans rolling
to the front at stop signs,
and you rubbing the dash
every so often to thank the car
for not needing the spare tire
we hadn’t fixed. We were on a trip
that felt like going to your father’s camp, only
we never got there and didn’t care.
It was a beautiful day, just enough wind
coming into the back to make the kids
squint with pure pleasure
as it scammed their hair, and your mother
passed them, saying what a nice ride it was
in the end, small voice
she used only for your father.
It was then in the rearview mirror I saw him,
wearing the brown cardigan he always wore
and putting on the shining bell
of his saxophone as if just back
from an intermission. You were smiling,
and suddenly I saw the reason
we were traveling together
and did not want to stop
was Herman, who just sat there
in the cargo space, breathing the scale
until the whole family sat back
in their seats, and then he lifted his sax
and opened one more song as wide
and delicate as the floating trees.

The Faces of Americans in 1859

for Sacvan

Let us analyze the American. . . . The American head
is generally large, which the phrenologists attribute
to increased development of the brain. There are all varie-
ties of face, though the oval predominates. . . . The fac-
tial features are, for the most part, more sharply chi-
elled with us than with any other people.
"Are We a Good-Looking People?" (1859)

When you turned
to the farmhand who hailed you
from the field you could see the face
of the American.
Everyone had the face.
There was an appreciation
for the way each chin perfected
an oval.

All day in his shop
the blacksmith
swung his hammer laughing
at the nondescript faces of Europe.
As night in her home
the mother
admired the heads
of her children, already large.
As far away
as Kansas
their chiselled features rose
up from the horizon.
Indians who looked down at the faces
of those they had killed
with their arrows
wept at their mistake.

Beyond the gap. . . . Humor is good if it
can introduce a richness of tone. I want
people to laugh, but even if you’re laughing
at the people in the poem, sooner or later
through humor, you begin to enter their
situation with sympathy.

The Third Part of McNair’s
book takes us into America’s past,
especially when the poetry turns to early
artists like Edward Hicks, Fitz Hugh Lane,
and Rufus Porter. The title poem, "The Faces of Americans in 1859," addresses the
arrogance and narcissism in our past, just
as earlier poems examined those qualities in
our time. But McNair understands the
dream of early Americans that caused them
to see themselves as beautiful New Men
destined to shape the future, and he can at
once disparage yet sympathize with the
idealism of a painter like Hicks whose bear
"feels foolish/to be wearing claws," and
whose unearthy leopards and wolves only
snatch at dreams of their bodily powers.
Likewise, McNair writes with under-
standing of Fitz Hugh Lane’s obsession to
gain the perfect perspective, to seek some
spiritual truth in nature, even though his
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FACES OF AMERICANS is the best book to win the award in ages. And ronowed Frost scholar James Cox of Dartmouth, to take just one further example, speaks of the “wonderful breadth of humor running or breathing through (McNair’s) imaginative grasp of life.” Of McNair’s book in progress, Cox said that the poems “are delicate and at the same time so strong, which is what poetry has to be and what it truly is.” McNair, Cox added, can “visualize... meaning in what is nothing less than vision itself.”

By Bob Begbie

Bob Begbie is a teacher and freelance writer who lives in Newfields, N.H.