Poems For The Back Pockets Of America

The poet has a new thought; he has a whole new experience to unfold; he will tell us how it was with him, and all men will be richer in his fortune. For the experience of each new age requires a new confession, and the world seems always waiting for its poet.

Ralph Waldo Emerson

NORTH SUTTON — Mud and gray subdue the hills around West McNear's farmhouse, the barrenness of April concealing its promise. Inside, the story is different. The poet Wesley McNair has come into his own.

His first book, The Faces of Americans in 1893, has won prizes and acclaim. This, coupled with the hope and encouragement from poets he respects, has relieved McNair of the dark thought that maybe he wasted 15 years writing poems.

Now, at 42, he is young enough to translate success into ambition and old enough not to confuse ambition with compulsion. He is determined to make the most of the years just ahead.

McNear is a son of northern New England poverty. A native of Springfield, Vt., he remembers his early youth as a time when his family was unable to afford Easter baskets and left-over food from the school cafeteria, when his mother appeared in vain at the town office for help.

"I've always felt like an outsider," he said in an interview last week. "I guess maybe I still feel that a little bit, and I like the fact more now.

McNear respects his muse, fearing to try or even to know too much about how his poetry might be. He does know what inspires the poems.

"Poems for me always begin with image or situation, poetry, the words always come afterward," he said. His poetry is either narrative, "telling a story in a meaningful way", or presents images or situations that have been "right there all along" around us, so familiar that we haven't noticed them.

The good stories can come from anywhere. The story that grew into a poem in this month's Atlantic McNair picked up at least fourth-hand from a story in the Monitor about a man in Epsom who collects stories. It is in the telling that they become McNair's.

His voice is spare and wry with a gift for timing. Its New England accent is most pronounced when speaking the poems' settings, Bradford, North Sutton, Enfield, and in country detail, a half-imagined window, for example, where hairpin and nightcrawlers are advertised.

McNear came of age in the late '50s and early '60s, when the American myth collided with the reality of assassinations, civil strife and a futile war. Looking back, he sees the myth crumbling for him when NASA tried to bring comic book characters to life.

"They started putting those astronauts into space and creating this hype over superbeings, so the astronauts were superfigures, all powerful, the way my Superman was, and yet it seemed they could almost be replaced by a monkey, or by some machine," he said. "And the machine could be programmed maybe even more efficiently than the astronauts."

The poems in The Faces of Americans in 1883 often turn on the difference between myth and reality in America. The year itself, besides being the date of the article that inspired the title poem, was "in the decade of the peak moment of Manifest Destiny when there was a uniform belief in the rightness of an American enterprise," McNair said.

People had been conditioned to believe "that there really was a uniform American face, the face of the New World that didn't exist anywhere else, especially in the Old World." So while Northern New England shaped his poetic voice and vision, and while he embraces his regionalism, it is an American poetry he seeks to write.

"If I want to do anything, it's to write about people, what they do," he said. "American poetry, as many contemporary Americans write it, has reached a dead end because it's poetry that features the pronoun 'I'."

Although American poets owe Walt Whitman a debt, McNair said, "we need to find a new subject matter and turn ourselves out to the world again and find images that belong to all of us."

"And also to tell them stories, the stories they crave. 'What happened?' is what we want to know. I want to write a poetry of 'What happened?' but I want to make it as deep as a poetry as I can to make people aware of the resources in the present that might shock them, but eventually they see that yes, this is something that I know about and maybe even a little bit of me that I wondered about — I just didn't recognize it."

His narrative poems tap into a rich vein of rural tradition.

"A Yankee would never give you raw speculation or pure meditation but would more likely tell you a story about what happened to his cousin Charlie," McNair said.

"By telling the story, he'd somehow make the point, because the story contains the truth."

"But the story is not as simple as relating what happened on a literal level. McNair often compares his poems to dirty jokes or drinking songs, maybe not to moronic but to the academic but for the back pocket of the common American.

His narrative poems "feature images or situations that are shared by many, people, so they have their own symbolic life," he said.
"Only it hasn't been discovered yet or made over into art."

"It's sort of like wresting those things from the familiar world, making them strange to people, and then, when they come back into the poem and say that's familiar, maybe, it doesn't quite become a drinking song, but it feels more like something you can shove in your back pocket."

At Colby Sawyer College in New London, where he has been on the faculty since 1968, McNair teaches American studies. This April afternoon, he had two classes. In both he used slides of American paintings, reading them like poems to show his students how the artists interpreted their times.

From canyons by Thomas Cole and his contemporaries, McNair described Manifest Destiny. The American was invincible west, where he could seek his soul under bright skies in a land of plenty. Later, in the work of Winslow Homer, the skies had turned from blue to gray, man from the dominant figure to the dominated. The artist, McNair said, "inherits a set of conventions which he alters to fit the circumstances of his time."

The progression in this century had Grant  

(See McNAIR — Next Page)
The Poems Of Wesley McNair

The Faces of Americans in 1833
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 varieties of face, though the oval predominates. The facial features are, for the most part, more sharply chiselled with us than with any other people. “Are We a Good Looking People?” (1833)

When you turned to a farmer 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.

At 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 who had shot their arrows wept at their mistake.

Small Towns Are Passing
Small towns are passing into the rearview mirrors of our cars. The white houses are moving away, wrapping trees around themselves, and stores are taking their gas pumps down the street backwards. Just like that whole families picnicking on their lawns lift over the hill, and kids on bikes ride toward us off the horizon, leaving no trace of where they have gone. Signs turn back and start after them. Packs of mailboxes, like dogs, chase them around corner after corner.

Where I Live
You will come into an ancient town whose houses move apart as if you’d interrupted a private discussion. This is the place you must pass through to get there. Imagining lives tucked in like china plates, continue driving. Beyond the landscaped streets, beyond the last colonial gas station and unsolved by zoning, is a road. It will take you to old farmhouses and trees with car-tire swings. Signs will announce hairdressing and nightclubbers. The timothy grass will run beside you all the way to where I live.

Rufus Porter, Itinerant Muralist and Inventor, Undertakes a Commission in Bradford Center, N.H.

In 1824, having left a volcano to erupt in the middle of a hunting scene in East Jaffrey, you arrived. The citizens are scarcely more surprised than your hunter, continuing on with his dog as smoke curls above his head.

Nobody comes out of the doors of the three houses. In a leaning shed the blacksmith keeps up a slow ringing sound that dies in the fields. In short, the place is perfect. Fabulously static like farm towns you walked through in New York, imagining your Great Dirigible Airship lifting off Saint Helena with Napoleon. Here in Bradford Center you begin to think about setting free the walls:

Boats cross your mind, there is a red house with a yellow door. Whole rooms open into trees. You turn to your assistant with eyes that are not mad exactly. “It’s the best damn thing since East Jaffrey,” you tell him. Then you talk about paint.

Story by
Mike Pride
Photo by
Ken Williams

Wesley McNair relaxes at home with his dog Woody.
McNAIR
(Continued From Page 17)

Wood celebrating the rural work ethic and his successors painting the worker as a slave to consumption. In a poem by David Ignatow, McNair told his students, Americans yield their identities to work, and goods and property become "so much more important than individual despair."

The teacher and the poet are in many ways one. "I think maybe the teaching becomes a way of exploring themes I want to write about, too," McNair said. Artists show up often in The Faces of Americans in 1853, and vivid images abound in McNair's verse.

In the form his poems take, sight has perhaps as much influence as sound. While he believes American poets must abandon the self-examination that dates to Whitman's "Song of Myself," for form he looks to Emerson.

Emerson called for a poetry that would not be confined by meter. This poetry would arise from "thought so passionate and alive that like the spirit of a plant or an animal it has an architecture of its own, and adorns nature with a new thing."

McNair recalls his first successful poem with a passion that Emerson would have appreciated. He had been writing short stories and collecting rejection slips. One summer he wrote a poem about moving out of an old house.

"I remember driving through the countryside in this blue Rambler American we had — we called it Old Blue; it always had bad tires and it was just a wreck — shrieking, 'I've found the form!'"

Now, 15 years later, the man who found the form has published a book that contains the poem about moving out of the old house. It hasn't made him rich, nor will his second book, almost ready, which contains poems already published in Atlantic, Poetry and elsewhere. Poetry doesn't pay.

In fact, McNair fears that he will soon have to leave New Hampshire to make enough money to feed his family, educate his children and preserve the time to write. He believes he could take a sense of this place with him in his mind. "But still," he said, "there's something to be said for laying claim to the territory by living there."

Where Wesley McNair lives now, in a white farmhouse on a dirt road a quarter mile, as the poet walks, from Kezar Lake, there is a large window that many other eyes have looked through. The glass is not the same, certainly, since this part of the farmhouse was built two centuries ago, but the view is little changed.

The white of winter is gone from the hills, and summer will soon lend them brighter hues. The poet will walk the hills in warmth and try to find a way to stay at home and tell us how it is with him and make us richer with his fortune.