



Wesley McNair relaxes at home with his dog Woody.

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 Wesley McNair'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 1853*, has won prizes and acclaim. This, coupled with praise 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.

McNair is a son of northern New England poverty. A native of Springfield, Vt., he remembers his early youth as a time when his family received charity Easter baskets and left-over food from the school cafeteria, when his mother appealed in vain at the town offices for coal.

"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."

McNair respects his muse, fearing to try to say or even to know too much about how his poetry is made. He does know what inspires the poems.

"Poems for me always begin with image or situation or story, and the words always come afterward," he said. His poetry is either narrative, "telling a good story in a metaphorical way, or it 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 in the poems' settings, Bradford, North Sutton, Enfield, and in country detail, a half-imagined window, for example, where hairdressing and nightcrawlers are advertised.

McNair 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 superheroism, so the astronauts were super-figures, 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 1853* 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 and what people do," he said.

"American poetry, as many contemporary Americans write it, has reached a dead end because it is a poetry that features that 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 people.

"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 a poetry as I can to make people aware of the resonances in their own lives, a poetry that might shock them, but eventually they see that yes, this is something that I know about and maybe have even thought about or 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."

For the poet it is not as simple as relating what happened on a literal level. McNair often compares his poems to dirty jokes or drinking songs, meant not for the vest pocket of the academic but for the back pocket of the common American.

His non-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 canvases by Thomas Cole and his contemporaries, McNair described Manifest Destiny. The American was invited 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

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The Poems Of Wesley McNair

The Faces of Americans in 1853

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?" (1853)

When you turned
to a 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.

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 they had killed
with 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 tilt
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 antique 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 nightcrawlers.
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 arrive. 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.

The Faces of Americans in 1853

Poems by Wesley McNair

Story by
Mike Pride

Photo by
Ken Williams



Monitor/Ken Williams

Wesley McNair chats with Stan LeBrun at the Vernondale Store in North Sutton on a rainy April morning.

McNAIR

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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 "a 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 bald 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*, *Po-*

etry 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.