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Four Poems

Wesley McNair

THE LAST TIME SHORTY TOWERS FETCHED THE COWS

In the only story we have of Shorty Towers, it is five o'clock and he is dead drunk on his roof deciding to fetch the cows. How he got in this condition, shingling all afternoon, is what the son-in-law, the one who made the back pasture into a golf course, can't figure out. So, with an expression somewhere between shock and recognition, he just watches Shorty pull himself up to his not-sofull height, square his shoulders, and sigh that small sigh as if caught once again in an invisible swarm of bees. Let us imagine, in that moment just before he turns to the roof's edge and the abrupt end of the joke which is all anyone thought to remember of his life, Shorty is listening

to what seems to be the voice of a lost heifer, just breaking upward. And let us think that when he walks with such odd purpose down that hill jagged with shingles, he suddenly feels it open into the wide, incredibly green meadow where all the cows are.

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AN EXECUTIVE'S AFTERLIFE

The others in hell can't believe he's allowed to go free for eternity. Part of their punishment as they sit beside the fire in chains is to watch him pass by. His punishment, after a life of having all the answers, is to have none whatsoever and keep bumping into people who ask him questions: his wife, for instance, here because she never dared ask him any, choosing to die a slow death instead. How are you? is all she has to say to make him turn, always for the first time, to discover her with no coiffure and ashes on her face. Under his hand, which never leaves his chest, the pain feels like the beginnings of the coronary that killed him, and it only gets worse when he sees the son he bullied, an old man in chains. Unable to leave the comfort of his father's wealth and live his own life, rich or poor, the son now kneels at the flames trying to get warm with no result forever. He's too intent to ask his question, which the father, on his way, already knows: Why did you do this? Soon he walks past former doormen, bellhops, and bag ladies who can't wait to ask him the one thing that makes their day, even in hell: Who do you think you are? Nobody's nice, except the stewardess from first-class. She liked serving passengers with expensive suits and watches so much, she must seek them out with her eternally nice smile to inquire, Would you like something to drink? She has no drinks,

of course, this is hell, after all, so he's left to suffer his unquenchable thirst, not a hurt or absence he feels in the throat, but there under his hand, in his sensitive and innocent heart, which the devil, to give him his due, went nearly to heaven to find.

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SMOKING

Once, when cigarettes meant pleasure instead of death, before Bogart got lung cancer and Bacall's voice, called "smoky," fell

into the gravel of a lower octave, people went to the movies just to watch the two of them smoke. Life was nothing but a job,

Bogart's face told us, expressionless except for the recurrent grimace, then it lit up with the fire he held in his hands and breathed

into himself with pure enjoyment until each word he spoke afterward had its own tail of smoke. When he offered a cigarette

to Bacall, she looked right at him, took it into her elegant mouth and inhaled while its smoke curled and tangled with his. After the show,

just to let their hearts race and taste what they'd seen for themselves, the audiences felt in purses, shirt pockets, and even inside the sleeves of T-shirts where packs of cigarettes were folded, by a method now largely forgotten. "Got a light?" somebody would say, "Could I bum

one of yours?" never thinking that two of the questions most asked by Americans everywhere would undo themselves and disappear

like the smoke that rose between their two upturned fingers, unwanted in a new nation of smoke-free movie theaters,

malls and restaurants, where politicians in every state take moral positions against cigarettes so they can tax them for their favorite projects. Just fifty

years after Bogart and Bacall, smoking is mostly left in the hands of waitresses huddled outside fancy inns, or old clerks on the night shift in mini-marts,

or hard-hats from the road crew on a coffee-break around the battered tailgate of a sand truck – all paying on installment with every drag for bridges and schools. Yet who else but these, who understand tomorrow is only more debt, and know better than Bogart that life is work,

should be trusted with this pleasure of the tingling breath they take today, these cigarettes they bum and fondle, calling them affectionate names

like "weeds" and "cancer sticks," holding smoke and fire between their fingers more casually than Humphrey Bogart and blowing it into death's eye.

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LOVE HANDLES

If the biker's head where the hair was shines in the sun while he blows into his helmet to get the heat out of it, she doesn't mind. It's not him with the bald spot, it's just him. And she likes feeling the fleshy overhang in the front when she climbs on behind and takes him into her arms. How else could he carry her up and up the wild, quick, fivenote scale that they float off on? Anyway, who doesn't love a belly? Forget the revulsion we're supposed to feel looking at the before picture in the diet ad and remember the last time you asked a good friend you hadn't seen in years, What's this? patting where the shirt stuck out. Or think of feeling somebody's back, like the two old lovers lying in bed, she turned away from him inquiring over her shoulder with her finger, What's that, right there, is it a bug bite or a mole? And he, the one trusted with this place so private not even she can see it, touching it, not skin or flesh in this special, ordinary moment but something else, something more, like the hand the hunched old lady has in hers going across the fast-food parking lot. Beside her an old man, the hand's owner is walking with what you and I might think of as a sort of kick over and over, but what they don't think of at all,

balancing each other like this so they can arrive together to get a burger. The point is, you can't begin to know how to hold another body in your eye until you've held it a few times in your hand or in your arms. Any ten couples at the Fireman's Ball could tell you that. Put aside your TV dreams of youth running its fingers over the hood of a new car, or the smiling faces of Tammy the weathergirl and Bob on sports, she with the unreal hair and he with the hair that's not real, and imagine the baldies with their corsaged wives under the whirling chunks of light at the Ball. Think of their innocence, all dressed up to be with the ones they've known half their lives. See how after those years of nudging and hugging and looking each other all over, they glide, eyes closed, on love handles across the floor.

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