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Autor: McNair, Wesley
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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-so-
full 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.

From "The Town of No and My Brother Running" by
Wesley McNair
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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.

From "Fire" by Wesley McNair

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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, five-
note 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.

From "Talking in the Dark" by Wesley McNair
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