

**Zeitschrift:** SPELL : Swiss papers in English language and literature  
**Herausgeber:** Swiss Association of University Teachers of English  
**Band:** 18 (2006)  
  
**Artikel:** Four poems  
**Autor:** McNair, Wesley  
**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-100046>

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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.

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