# An American Voice: An Interview with Wesley McNair by Mike Pride

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**Pride:** *You once said your hope as a poet was to write "poems for the back pockets of Americans." What did you mean by that?*

**McNair:** I would like my poems to be read by ordinary people. Of course, I want to write poems that please poets I respect, too. But if I had to choose my audience, I'd probably pick the one with the ordinary people in it. The poets already know how words can restore the vision, but the others often don't know, and need to.

**Pride:** *There is a hardscrabble quality to the lives in many of your poems, and your characters often seek to escape or transcend their circumstances. What in your own past leads you to explore this phenomenon with such frequency—and such sympathy?*

**McNair:** I suppose my awareness of people outside of the mainstream who are up against it comes from my own upbringing. I spent my first months in a tenement house in Newport, New Hampshire, and shortly afterward, my father left the family—my mother, two brothers and me. The four of us ended up in project housing outside of Springfield, Vermont. My mother took in sewing and cut hair, but there was never much money. In fact, we were the ones the town brought Christmas and Easter baskets to. Later on, after my mother remarried, we moved to the country near Cornish, N.H., and I worked on farms there, some of the last ones in the area, all of them make-do operations, with the most ancient machinery. So if my characters have a hardscrabble quality, it's because they come from the hardscrabble life I knew then and developed an eye for. Many of the Northern New England poets I know have come here as adults, and reading their poems you have the sense they've discovered a special world that has in one way or another restored them. The people and places I often deal with, nobody would likely come here for. There's nothing special about them; in fact, they're just part of the ongoing life here as I've observed it from boyhood on—you know, poor people driving Cadillacs, tenement dwellers, farmers on the edge, victims of disability, misfits of one kind or another—the disparate society you find in the little, patchy towns of this region. Whether the people of my poems happen to be in trouble or making out all right, what moves me is that in the lives they live, which few notice, they're getting by. I want to try to say how they're doing it, and to show they're important after all—that in their way they speak for all of us.

**Pride:** *So your poetry intends to honor ordinary people who have been forgotten?*

**McNair:** That's certainly part of it. The other part is that I want to honor the ordinary self of the reader. By writing poems about common people who are in many ways outside the influence of the culture, I want to remind the reader of who we are down under some of the layers of civilized life—of what unacculturated sorrow is like, or happiness, or wonderment. I think we all need to address each other more often in this simple way, one human to another.

**Pride:** *Your own experience has had an American dream quality: a boy from a poor background making it as a poet. Tell me more about your upbringing. How did you escape your impoverished beginnings? What obstacles did you have to overcome?*

**McNair:** The one problem with your question is that the poverty didn't stop with my boyhood. Like lots of guys my age, I married young—too young, really, when I wasn't yet out of college. Mind you, if I had it to do over again, I would do it just to be with my wife, but because she brought two children to the marriage and we quickly had two more, we were perpetually broke and in debt. This was true even when I moved from high school to college teaching. One day I discovered why: my pay was exactly $200 above the poverty level for a family of six. When I went into the college president's office and told him about it, he wore an expression of presidential sympathy from start to finish, never quite saying what he would do about it because, of course, he had no intention of raising my salary, or raising anyone else's, even though we were all paid miserably there. Until I was able to leave the place, I made ends meet by teaching two or

three courses at area colleges in addition to the four I regularly taught. Looking back on my life then, I don't understand how I wrote at all. The fact is, during the days when i was not only teaching but going to graduate school, I didn't write much. But there came a time when I felt I couldn't breathe without spending time with my poems, and after that, I began to preserve every morning for poetry, whatever else happened. And, you know, I learned a valuable lesson from my struggle with that college: if you want to become a poet, you've got to fight against the academy and never let it make you a company man. That's a lesson a lot of academics at more privaledged places than I've hung out in don't learn until it's too late. They make the right maneuvers to get tenure and rehearse the clever repartee at dinner parties with their friends and collegues, and one day they wake up to discover their testicles are missing—they're not quite sure how it happened or when. I guess I'm not really talking here about the kind of obstacle you meant by your question, but the academy nonetheless offers poets an important obstacle to overcome, especially since so many of us are teachers. The phrase "academic poet" didn't just appear out of the air.

**Pride:** *As a boy, you daydreamed of being a rock'n'roll singer. What pipeline to the wider world did rock'n'roll open to you, and how did the rocker in you turn to poetry?*

**McNair:** I actually had a rock'n'roll band when I was in college. I remember working on a farm in Cornish when I was fifteen years old and dreaming of buying an electric guitar with my earnings—$10 a week with room and board. I'd gotten a piece of wood about the width of a guitar handle, put some pencil lines on it and five pieces of string, and I used to carry that thing around in my pocket, taking it out to practice as I rode the hay-truck back to the barn. At night I'd sit at the supper table with the farm's owner and his wife—she would be talking to him on and on in Danish, and he, saying absolutely nothing, just sitting there to my left as if he didn't hear her. His right eye was gone, and from my perspective, all that was visible was this eyeless face that made you feel his silence even more strongly. Together, they seemed so alien, and the work was so hard, I looked forward to getting to my bedroom and turning on the old radio I'd brought with me and bringing in WBZ from Boston or WPTR from New York—news from home, rock'n'roll. My opening to the wider world, in fact, was the orange light on the front side of that radio, which got wider and brighter as I tuned the signal. I don't know how much influence that music had on my poetry, but the songs I heard and learned then, and the folk music I played in the years afterward, might have helped me be more direct in my poems and more willing to risk the expression of feeling in them. They might have made me more aware of the American language, too, the American voice. There is no question, though, that the music sharpened my appreciation for popular culture, which I still love to get into my work—the visual culture especially, and the myths associated with it. I once wrote that as a poet, maybe I'm right back where I was at fifteen: part of me in the farmhouse, and the other part in the culture of Everywhere, U.S.A.

**Pride:** *When did it dawn on you that you might become a poet?*

**McNair:** I must have been writing poems pretty early because I remember being known as the class poet in second grade. I continued off and on until I reached high school, where I got a real push from two students named John Huot and George Ingraham, John going to college at Columbia, and George enrolled at McGill. I met them at Lost River Gorge in New Hampshire, where we all worked one summer, and they showed me some poems they had written, inspiring me to write a couple of my own. The following fall, John did me a favor I'll never forget. He sent me a box of books by contemporary writers, giving me my first look at poets like T.S. Eliot and William Carlos Williams and my first acquaintance with essays by R.P. Blackmur and Randall Jarrell treating the work of Cummings, Moore, Frost and others. There were volumes of fiction, too, by people like Faulkner, McCullers and Hemingway, each of them helpful to me in the poetry I would one day write. To top it off, there was a copy of a campus literary magazine John had published a poem in, showing me it was really possible to publish. After all, there in cold print was the name of a person I knew. Receiving that box with my own name on it in the boonies of West Claremont made me feel that somebody cared about my development as a writer, and that it might be possible for me to become one.

**Pride:** *Why was it important to you to become a poet?*

**McNair:** My mother had something to do with it, I'm sure—at least with my desire to become a writer. She read stories to me and spoke about authors in a way that made me feel their importance. But then I think I

had the right mentality for poetry, too. I think that poets are more troubled than others might be about the transcience of life, and they write poems to preserve their experience—to say, "I was here, and my being here meant something." Poets also have this sense that there are coded messages around us in the world. Codes are made up of symbols, after all, and poets spend their lives training themselves to find out what the messages are and teaching us about them. It's a truism, I know, that poets shouldn't be didactic, but teaching is one of their primary motives, and it's one of mine, too, whether I'm writing poems or, in my other life, instructing a class.

**Pride:** *"My Brother Running" is set in the go-go '80's with Ronald Reagan in the role of a lifetime. As the brother's life and death unfold, the reader gets regular glimpses of the popular and political culture of the time. These are usually once removed—through the window of television. What connection were you making between the brother's story and what Ronald Reagan regularly called the renewed spirit of America?*

**McNair:** We all know about the American theme of renewal. It's in the before and after pictures of any diet ad—and of course, American politicians make use of it in campaigns that have to do with what they call "change." Reagan was especially good at replaying the myth, and of course in his second term, the period of the poem, he had a booming economy to back him up. His people would talk about how he was unleashing the spirit of America, using that almost cartoonish language to describe what was going on in the country. In fact, Reagan himself seemed like a cartoon character—a little Mr. Magooish, if you recall, with that bafflement of his and that impaired hearing—but that didn't matter because the country and Reagan were doing just fine, and anyway, who said the presidency had to be that complicated? I wanted to get the texture of that optimism—the cartoonish simplicity of it—into the poem as a backdrop for the main action, which is about the brother's own search for renewal. So the Reagan and Bush and Christa McAuliffe stuff in the book comes mostly, as you say, from TV sets—the one at the mother's house, for instance, whose picture tube is so blown out it shows the Christa McAuliffe and George Bush with big hands and flat heads—or there's the grainy color TV at the motel where the narrator stays during his brother's funeral. Of course, when you get to that second TV, there's a rerun of the Challenger explosion, and a kind of detonation of the Reagan cartoon as well. So at the same time you find out about the brother's death, you're discovering the limits of the renewed spirit of America.

**Pride:** *In fact your brother died at around the time of the Challenger disaster, and you were then living in New Hampshire, Christa McAuliffe's home state. Where and how did the poetic vision develop to deal with these twin shocks—the deep personal trauma of losing your brother and the national but less personal tragedy of McAuliffe's death—in a single work?*

**McNair:** The two disasters did happen at the same time. Not that their real-life coincidence would have made it appropriate to put McAuliffe into the poem, of course. In fact, I had to manipulate events so she would play what seemed to me an appropriate role. What kept coming back to me was that moment right after the Challenger's fateful lift-off when if blew up. I came to see that explosion as a parallel for the predicament of my brother, who was himself propelled by forces he couldn't control and got running so fast he also blew up—died, that is, from an explosion of the heart. Of course, there are other links for McAuliffe in the poem. She's at the White House with George Bush "promising to take the souls of everyone who hasn't won the teachernaut contest up/ with her" at the moment the stepfather pulls out the transmission from his car and it rolls off his blocks and kills him. There and elsewhere I wanted to suggest McAuliffe as a symbol of the American Dream of the 1980s that's unreachable for the people in the poem. In a crucial moment at the end, the narrator confuses her with Bob's dream-woman, the secret girlfriend, so you have the sense of Bob himself reaching for the American Dream. And then the destruction happens, not only for Bob but for McAuliffe and the dream she represents.

**Pride:** *When you say McAuliffe was propelled by forces beyond her control, obviously you mean the shuttle, but what else do you mean?*

**McNair:** I'm referring to politics. Whether this was exactly intended or not, she became the pawn of an administration that was promoting her as America's teacher in space at the very moment it was cutting funds for education. McAuliffe developed such a wide following, she also helped NASA in its appeal for

increased funding of the space program—at the same time she provided a cover for the agency's incompetence and corruption, which we found out about after the Challenger blew up. I guess most people agree by now that there was often a distance between the imagery the Reagan administration created for itself and the reality of what the administration was actually doing. In my mind, the Challenger explosion gave us the first, troubling view of that distance.

**Pride:** *Like many of your shorter poems, "My Brother Running" contains references to popular culture. It also has the political references we talked about. How do you square the mission of a poet to embody universal emotions and eternal themes with the ephemeral nature of Sears catalogs, Nike tennis shoes, cars with tailfins and even the Reagan presidency? Does it bother you that these references may be lost on non-contemporary readers?*

**McNair:** If those references dominated the poem, I'd be worried. As it is, they're at the edges of it, just as they're at the edges of my new long narrative, "Fire." And I have earlier writers as my guides in the use of popular culture. Euripides and Theseus, for instance; or Shakespeare and Richard III; or Joyce and Dublin. Then there was Walt Whitman, who wrote about Lincoln, Western settlement and the Mexican-American War in poems we continue to read and love. I think if you write well about the details of your own culture, placing them in the context of universal themes, you can communicate with those who share your period in history and those who come along later as well, helping everybody who reads your work to understand the time you live in. And anyway, it's the details of your culture that are likely to inspire your commentary about it. So you'd be lost without them.

**Pride:** *In your newest book, Fire, your observations of the popular culture rise to a new level. I'm thinking of "Smoking." In that poem, those smoky, romantic scenes from Bogart and Bacall movies allow for a perspective on how the place of smoking in American life has been utterly transformed during the last half-century. This seems like a poem you might not have written as a younger poet. How did it come to pass?*

**McNair:** I began with a feeling of nostalgia for the 40s and 50s when everybody smoked cigarettes, and smoking was so deeply a part of American life that we understood ourselves and others in terms of the cigarette. Then I followed my normal procedure of listing in my notebook a range of images, thoughts, and lines associated with the cigarette as I remembered it, including references to period advertising and the movies, particularly the movies of Bogart and Bacall. Once I began scribbling about the way Bogart and Bacall smoked, I found myself starting the poem, not knowing where I was going, but riding on intuition and chance—the best way to make a poem. Recently a critic said that my poems about American culture are about what he called the "soul life" of America. This is something like what I was I was after in "Smoking." At a certain point I also knew I had to talk about an issue that has bothered me for years now: the extravagant taxation of cigarettes, which has given states a politically correct way to fund all sorts of legislative programs, whether they're needed or not. The problem is, the ones who end up paying for the new programs are the people of the lower class, who smoke more than anyone else—and who don't have the political clout to influence legislative programs of any kind. I was pleased that this poem gave me an opportunity to speak for the underprivileged not only as regional, but as a national group—as happens also in poems like "Old Guys" and "An Executive's Afterlife," another poem from *Fire*, in which, you may recall, a C.E.O. in hell is pitted against doormen, bellhops, and bag ladies. You're certainly right that all this is a recent development in my poetry.

**Pride:** "*Smoking" is also one of several poems in Fire that introduce variations of fire—literal and figurative—before the reader reaches the title poem. How intentionally did you work to make this book a whole rather than merely a collection of poems?*

**McNair:** The poems of *Fire* have an odd history. The title poem of the book took me six years to write, a year longer that it took to finish "My Brother Running." But most of the short pieces of *Fire* were written during the winter of 2000, in a period of three or four months. I have never had poems come that quickly; I kept telling my friend Peter Harris, a fellow poet I showed the new work to week by week, "I can't shut my third eye!" Yet as I worked on the poems, they seemed so disparate in content and form, I didn't see how they would fit together at all. Some were about family, as the long poem was, but others had to do with politics and the popular culture, and still others seemed random in their subject matter. Gradually I began to

see how to group the poems by theme, and then I saw where the gaps were and what sort of poems I needed to fill the gaps—stressing that motif of fire you noticed as I went along. I tucked a few new poems in during the summer, and once I'd completed the book, to my great surprise, it seemed more coherent than any other I'd written. Probably the key to the coherence is that I did the core of my work on the poems in one ongoing period of concentration.

**Pride:** "*Fire*", *the title poem, is in some ways a companion piece to your earlier long poem, "My Brother Running." Your family life gave rise to both, and both have journeys—or at least constant motion—at the heart of them. What is it that you set out to do in these larger poems that you could not do in shorter poems?*

**McNair:** John Keats said that until a poet writes a long poem, he has not proven himself. Walt Whitman wrote long poems too, of course—though Dickinson's poems never exceed a page, so I won't say the long poem is for everybody. But it did have the effect of opening me up as a poet. I never wanted to write a long poem at all, but it turned out that all I had to say about my brother's life and death, and about the twisted dreams of the culture that drives him in "My Brother Running" would not fit into a cabinet painting and needed something more like the scale of a mural. The poems I worked on before turning to the long poem taught me the skills of compression—how to leave things out. But in "My Brother Running" I wanted to leave things in. So I was forced to learn a whole different way of writing poetry. In "Fire," too, I had a lot to include—the darker psychology of that family I mentioned, for instance, and the connections between their history and the dark history of the nation—the Depression, I mean, and all those twentieth-century wars, and the trouble they caused ordinary people who lived through them. I should add that when I started "Fire," I was no less apprehensive about writing a long poem than I was the first time around, but at least I'd had some training.

**Pride:** *Often at readings your poems bring laughter from the audience. Sometimes it is lighthearted, as though your listeners are recognizing themselves in some observation you have made in a poem. But what about those other times, when you write humor into a sad poem?*

**McNair:** Laughter and tears come from the same place. That's why one of the saddest plays I know, Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard,* is also hilarious in many passages. And why the friends of Kafka sat around laughing their heads off when he read them stories like "The Metamorphosis" and "A Hunger Artist." I don't claim to be the first to mix humor and sorrow, but I can't help being drawn to that mixture, it's so deep in me and all of us. Once, when my brother Paul was about to have an operation that might have killed him, I fel the need to write a poem about him playing his accordian. What came out was "When Paul Flew Away," in which this fictitious wife describes how Paul begins to pump his accordion, then slowly lifts out of his chair and flies out the window. Even she thinks it's funny, or at least fun, until she realizes he is not coming back and all she can do is watch him get smaller and smaller and disappear into the clouds. So toward the end of the poem, you begin to feel the sorrow of Paul's disappearance, and maybe a little compassion for the wife who will never see him again—a projection of me, of course, fearing what might result from my brother's operation. The wife contributes to the comedy of the poem—she's a simple woman and a little slow to make her discovery that Paul is actually flying away—but the humor that she helps create also, if I'm lucky, deepens our sympathy for her. In a great number of poems, I've used the humor of a character's predicament or a character's foibles to develop sympathy in the reader. In fact, one of the things I want most from a reader is a compassionate view of the world and all the creatures in it.

**Pride:** *You have spent time abroad. I am particularly interested in your experience in Chile, an experience that makes it explicitly into some of your poems. How did Chile affect your view of your own culture?*

**McNair:** There's this contemporary American genre of poems about life abroad—I'll call them poets-on-a-grant poems—that I'm very suspicious of because I think it's presumptuous to assume you can know very much about a foreign country after any brief encounter with it. The country I've learned most about by travelling is my own. When I was in Chile, I learned how pervasive, and also invasive, the U.S. influence is on everything from music and clothing styles to cultural values. not long after I got back home, I wrote "Hair on Television," which resulted from the attraction I felt to American popular culture, and from my heightened awareness, at the same time, of the banality of American culture and the sorrow of its influence.

A while later, I wrote "Big Cars," about those huge American clunkers from years back that sometimes turn up next to you on the thruway. The poem ends with a scene of a South American dictator driving one of them down a boulevard while people ran alongside it, reaching for, in the poem's words, "the great plenty of the New World." I actually saw a scene like that shortly after I arrived in Chile. There was a big parade in Santiago, and at the head of it, flanked by a crowd of people, was Pinochet in an old Ford Fairlane convertible. I put the scene into the poem because it suggested to me, in a comic and yet very serious way, the effect the United States has had on the dreams of these other Americans—and, of course, on their politics, so that many have little access to plenty of any kind.

**Pride:** *You compared your own native experience of Northern New England to the experience of established poets who have moved into Northern New England and discovered it. On the other hand, regionalism can be a confusing idea for a poet. How does your poetry bridge the distance between the rural settings in which you have chosen to live and the urban and suburban experience that so dominates American culture?*

**McNair:** To begin with, I think it's a mistake to assume that a writer who writes about country subjects can't speak to a city dweller, or that the concerns of an urban writer are irrelevant to a person living in the country. I say this because the writers I like best make use of their subject matter to set forth a way of looking at the world. This world view may, of course, be influenced by the places they write about, but it is also conditioned by their culture and their historical period, not to mention their feeling for other humans they share the planet with. It's in the larger view, I think, that we find a writer's intelligence and his true relevance to us, wherever we may happen to live. We've all had the experience of throwing down a book that gives us only the literal subject, without the interpretive shaping of the subject I'm talking about. There's nothing more claustrophobic than a book like that. I think most readers will be able to sense, say, the connections between the characters of *The Town of No* and all human beings, or the relevance of "My Brother Running" and the new narrative "Fire" to all of America. In any case, as my poems about American popular culture show, I don't write only about regional topics.

**Pride:** *For some other New England poets—Donald Hall, for example, or Robert Lowell—a family is a cast of revenants whom the poet uses to explore his own themes and feelings, usually with affection and a sense of loss. Although some of your work is elegy, the family in your poems is not like the family in theirs. What are you trying to say throough your idea of family about the culture of New England and the culture of America?*

**McNair:** Nobody would ever confuse Lowell's family with mine, that's for sure. That Lowell name connects with the whole history of high culture and pedigree in New England, whereas my family consists entirely of mongrels whose history is mostly unknown. I can see a stronger connection with the family in Hall's work, particularly in *Kicking the Leaves*, which is set in New Hampshire, as my own work about family is. But Hall's family has a patriarch. In his book, he skips a generation to write about his grandfather, Wesley Wells, linking him with an agrarian tradition that goes back to New England's beginning. On the other hand, the family I describe in *My Brother Running*, *Talking in the Dark*, and my latest book, *Fire*; has no patriarch and no connection with tradition. There's only an abandoning father, and a Canadian-French stepfather whose ethnic past means nothing to his three stepsons. So unlike Hall, I end up dealing with a broken home and, through it, a broken New England and America. The other difference I see between my family, and Lowell's and Hall's, is that mine is distinctly lower class. So the New England and America I observe as I write about my family is closer to the other side of the tracks.

*—Mike Pride is the editor of New Hampshire's* ***Concord Monitor*** *and has won several regional and national awards in journalism. Pride is the co-author of* ***My Brave Boys*** *(University Press of New England). He has published articles about and interviews with a variety of New England poets.*