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The Back Wall of the Cave Poems

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THE BACK WALL OF THE CAVE

POEMS

by

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B.A., Kearney State College, 1966

Creative Work

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty

of

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in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

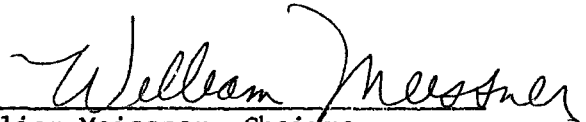
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Master of Arts

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This creative work submitted by Jeanne E. McLellan in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts at St. Cloud State University is hereby approved by the final evaluation committee.




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Early in my poetry writing, I discovered that the years of growing up on the plains of the Midwest offered a great amount of subject material. As I turned back layers of time and experience, I discovered that I had only touched on its surface. Indeed, it is an area that can be mined again and again. In addition, it was a time and place far enough removed from my present location that I could return to it with a different perspective, able to perceive people and events with a fresh outlook and a new appreciation.

The images of tumbleweeds, dust, and storms occur a number of times in the first section of poetry. They are evident in those poems written about the Nineteen Thirties when the Midwest suffered a severe drought, and the dust that swept the Plains was something that even small children would remember. In contrast to this scene was the visit paid by the city cousins touring the countryside from the vantage of a new car.

The many references to land and the fixation with it first occurs in "The Grandfather Who Came West." The poems that follow emphasize the feeling farmers have for their land, and the family endeavor that exists there.

The children planting the tree in "Patch-Quilted" originates from the tradition that school children were encouraged to plant trees because it gave them a commitment to the land, and also served to brighten a country nearly barren of trees.

The family poems show varying relationships and feelings toward the

individuals mentioned. "Shall I Clear the Rooms of Your Becoming?" perhaps indicates the tendency of parents to indulge their children's whims and fancies even to the point of subservience, in opposition to earlier, more austere generations.

Contrasting to the poems of the childhood and family, the lake poems reflect a different setting and time. Somewhat meditative in nature, they mirror the isolation of a lake and the manner in which a person may view life there, almost as if it is not truly reality, but a make-believe world, as noted by the references to dreams, visions, and fantasies.

The creature poems are inspired by the myriad of wild life that exists around the lakes and throughout the country. "The Loons' Return" is symbolic of the life of Minnesota lakes. In Walden, Thoreau wrote of the loon, that he came, "as usual, to moult and bathe in the pond, making the woods ring with his wild laughter. . . ."

The poetry in this collection follows a pattern moving from memories of early childhood and the family relationships to a life removed from those early times. In taking a second look at those things that linger in the mind, one finds reality--the unavoidable aspects of the world. In addition, one finds illusion, that the real world sometimes conflicts with the unreal. According to Wallace Stevens, illusion was playing a blue guitar: "You have a blue guitar, / You do not play things as they are." Later, he states: "I cannot bring a world quite round, / Although I patch it as I can."

THE BACK WALL OF THE CAVE

THE BACK WALL OF THE CAVE

Into any level house the years come
loosening some of the stones
judging the places where they sat.
If I would go there now some fragments
would be left, for the line between me
and that house has not not gone numb.

Those days ride deep and still glow
on the back wall of the cave
but I have found my own daybreak
and books that have not been read.

The tumbleweeds blow over and over
when the wind is hard and the dust
settles in and covers every familiar place.
Even the birds have lived out their song.

It is better to carry the pebbles
of that place in my pocket
than to risk a storm.

WAKENED TO A GRAYING WORLD

I saw the land once in a dream
before the Indians lived out their story.
The sky was bowl-shaped, brilliant.
The vivid trees like a sunburst.

In the soft light the sounds
were separate, intense like flint.
You could hear the moth wings beating
and the ripple of clear water in the creek.

In the distance a small fire burned
near the wigwam of the Sioux.
Courage prevailed on those level plains.
Birds flew arrowlike and knowing.

The trail to the past is lost.
I wakened to a graying world.

THE WAY WEST

Throngs of people crowding west
had to lean into the wind
and learn the flint-marked trail.

Indians disappeared
in the starved light ahead,
their blankets thin against the storm.

In lived towns together,
rattlesnakes and prairie dogs
watched all the progress--
saw the days going downward
fading into a dim mirror.

THE GRANDFATHER WHO CAME WEST

He was one of the first

to break the land.

Turning away from that Iowa town,
turning away from father and mother,
turning and turning and turning away.

Oh, he was a dancer

and a good one too.

Swinging the girls in wide circles,
swirling them in the white moonlight.

When he left they all cried:

"You'll come back soon!"

Crossing wide rivers, he passed bluffs
and sandhills, wending upstream by the Platte.
The path folded behind him but little he cared
for his eyes were fixed on the Western sky
and dreams running to meet him.

Mornings were shining and his sweat ran thick

as he turned the hard, black sod.

Plowing the furrows and planting straight rows
he came to know the land and believed
its boundaries were neighbors
to infinity.

TRAVELING ACROSS NEBRASKA

Rolling tumbleweeds are a familiar sight
on a land with wild beginnings but
to strangers passing through, it wants
glare and clamor of cities.

People wear confident smiles and judge
by a clear-eyed look or an honest gait.
Highways edged with goldenrod stretch
like ribbons between wide fields of grain
ripening yellow in the summer heat.

Days, sun is a fever.

Nights, heat lightning is flint
hitting rock. You are traveling
across a state that has known great storms.

SNOWFALL ON THE GREAT PLAINS

The first snowfall arrived
chalk-white and smooth
on the threshold of winter.
Naked cornfields softened,
still as sleep.

We rose quickly in the icy dawn.
Seeing the pattern of our breaths,
we clutched our clothes and sped
to dress near the kitchen stove.

Father returned from the barn
frosty as the foam
on the bucket of milk,
shutting the door on the wind
and drifting flakes.

Under an indifferent sky,
blackbirds leaned the wires like knifeblades.
The house stood insular--
The plains silently gathered snow.

WHEAT RIPENED WITHOUT SOUND

Midsummer, the wheat ripened without sound.

Warmth caressing slenderness
that whispered in undulating fields.

They feared a stormy sky that lashed
grain flat upon the ground,
a harvest lost to birds.

Landlocked, the men toiled in a sea of grain.

In dawn's half-light
they went to a labor old as the scythe,
new as a fresh-baked loaf of bread.

Chaff spouting from the thresher
created mountains of straw.

Wonderful sliding for children,
soft, golden nests for chickens.

DUST STORM

Tumbleweeds swept the land
scratching the back of our farm.
The house tried to hide
from the curtain of dust
sweeping the plains
but the powdery silt drifted in.
The wind raced over the land
making little stings of driven straw
and no sun could pierce
the thickness of that cloud.
The light shut out, dust sifted
through thin cracks around the windows
and gathered in grim mounds
behind our brows.

WE STAYED ON THE LAND

Everything we owned was on that land.
The fields stretched out like spokes
to touch the farms abandoned
by the drought. Showers were only a stain
on the thirsty ground and sword-like leaves
that curved from the earth turned brown
in the sun. We said goodbye to those
whose visions winnowed to the sky.

The stars taught us the lesson of waiting.
Our land was greater than the world.
Like rocks, earthbound we stayed. In the west
we saw clouds pretending to be mountains.

TORNADO

The storm hung like a cone
suspended over Wheeler's barn.
Suddenly it was a streak
that skipped along the ground.
We couldn't tell where sky
 touched land.

A giant roar--
the breath burst from our house.
Slivered windows glazed the air.
Next day's sky was innocent;
the rain talked soothingly.

FARM BOYS

The roar of cities is in their back
and mountains pull like magnets
through their eyelids.

Farm boys must listen
to the cry of prairie chickens
and ignore the shriek of gulls.
They must plant their feet firmly
in the sand of the river bottom
and hold tight to the long grasses
with their teeth.

AN ESCAPE TO THE MOUNTAINS

There were too many dunes.

Life was too gradual.

Each summer a man from a Midwestern city made a trip to the mountains to escape the flatness of his life.

He always stood at the summit of the tallest mountain and sailed his hat, a conservative straw with a wide brim, from the sheer cliffs.

The hat rode on little updrafts of air while he watched it spiraling and winding on breathlike currents. It scraped against the rocks and curled around the cheekbones of the canyons. While it flickered out of sight, he planned the slant of next year's hat.

THE LOONS' RETURN

THE LOON'S RETURN

A pair of loons return to the lake
conducting a courtship
in full view of summer.

Dark and light together
their white breasts shimmer
against the black water.

Diving deep, they discover
the secrets of the lake
and late I hear their raucous laugh
dividing the darkness,
with an unearthly call.

BUTTERFLIES ARE PROPER IN CATHEDRALS

Butterflies are proper in cathedrals.
Their transparent wings
are stained glass windows.
They soar to heights
then rest in adoration,
offering angelic tribute in elevated places.
Prayerfully, they tumble
sacrificing tattered wings
to ornament the altar.

THE SNAKE

Some hate reptile hearts,
frigid blood,
the snake's manner
of hugging the ground.
Branded by Eve as the Devil,
the snake crawls a slim line.
Their skin a hollow tube
they leave behind,
as they draw their narrow bodies
into the circle of the moon.

THE TAKING OF A DEER

Out of breath, he ran for miles
as the hunters closed in
seeking a twelve-point buck
among the oak and pines
and near the lake where
he drank cold, clear water
and could see his reflection
on cloudless days.

Exhausted, he tried to go on
over rocks and through branches
that tore at his antlers.

Staggering, he learned defeat
and turned to welcome death
or to scorn it.

DRAGONFLIES

Go there.

The water is calm.

On any post
or piece of wood,
you may find a skeleton.

Crunch it in your fist, or
fling it from you.
Its owner will not care.

With wings of thinnest gauze,
he has left this house
for his betrothed--
the air.

Soaring, gliding, skimming,
occasionally to stop
to ride upon a spar
offered by the murky pond.

In joyous flight,
he looks for food
and eats it on the wing.
Then joins the clan,
a frenzied net of dragonflies
hovering the pond.

THE NIGHTHAWK

Above our house

the nighthawk sits

His body slanted

against the limb.

A fellow of the darkness

consorting with owls--

velvet winged adventurers.

A hypnotist

with great round eyes

he slices through

wedges of the night.

THE COYOTE

His name is a scar
hard on the rim of the prairie.
Driven and shy of guns,
he stalks the hills.
A brother of the wolf,
his senses are sharp as a cliff.
Eluding bounty hunters
who sell his scalp and ears,
he howls a melancholy wail.
In the solitary darkness,
the coyote appeals to the moon.

THE GEESE ARE FLYING SOUTH

We know they are leaving now
by the muffled beat of wings
and the sound of their going
is a kind of death.

After the easy pace of days
the wines of Autumn
are stealing the light.

The geese are flying south
leaning their long necks forward
away from the hand of Winter.
With all their instincts right,
flying toward what they know.

PATCH-QUILTED

DECEMBER DREAMS

In the darkness of December
I love the evanescent flakes
softening stone corners
making lean shadows on the earth.

The oaks can be trusted
to burrow quietly under snow
While thousands of blackbirds
guard a desultory sky.

Beside the blazing chimney
I will dream inside thick books
until the drifts are patches
briefly waning into spring.

LEADLINE RESOURCES

MY FATHER'S PIPE

I used to watch the way
he filled his pipe
the bowl precisely resting
within the curved bow of his hand.

Sometimes I'd beg for him
to make smoke rings for me
then soon I saw the circles
rising from the province of his chair.

Running with my hands outreached
I tried to catch their wraithlike forms
before all of them vanished
into the hollows of the room.

CITY COUSINS

Traveling through all the narrow, winding country roads, our cousins from the city found our place one summer. They were kind, had soft, gentle manners. My mother served them lemonade and angel cake and we admired their shiny car, an expensive, new model with headlights that opened and closed like eyelids.

In an easy and convincing way, they envied our privacy and the independence of the rural life. Their children loved our shaggy dog, chased the chickens and begged to ride the horses. As they left we hung like vines on the garden gate and watched them gleaming out of sight. The dog chased their car a little ways and then turned back, his tongue lolling mouthfuls of dust.

WHEN I WAS TEN

When I was ten

we lived in a house with a wide front porch
our windows stared at the road
from the ancient swing
that crouched in the elm
I could sail high enough
to brush thin mist from the clouds.

Then wandering through

a chain of days
teetering awkwardly
on the edge of gracefulness

I was anxious over party manners

and high-heeled shoes
and short, straight hair
with stubborn ways.

To be suddenly thrust

in the grown-up world
bizarre and slightly swaying
gawky like a long-legged colt
shyly pressed against a glass
of shop windows with shiny dresses.

A SISTER'S REFLECTIONS

Girl of my childhood

I see your reflection

in my mirror.

Our sunlit girlhood

of metronomed lessons

prim mother-of-pearl

proper advice

and cockle-shell gardens

of sugar and spice.

Down a stairway

with rhymed lines

tempestuous two plus twos

bobby-socks

and saddle shoes.

Swinging wide from our cradle

an old-new design

of sighs and tears

of cakes and wine.

EXPLORING AN ATTIC

My grandmother's mind
was a twilight place,
an attic of dusty relics
crochet-work and quilts.
Half-dark in the gloaming,
I pried into dreams
and deep underneath
where it's too dim to see
I cleared away
 tangled webs
and found treasures
of burgeoning sprouts.

MOTHER-DAUGHTER PACT

After you had gone, Eva Joy,
your feather-light frame still
invaded my dreams. I called aloud
but there were only lighted candles
and a cross.

I first said your name when I was one.
You called me curious child
and taught me how to sing
when I was two.

Cascades were always just inside my lids
and when the streams ran down,
you called me little goose.
That stiffened up my spine.

You made my pinafores and cut my hair
and on cold nights you went
from room to room
and pulled the quilts around us.

I have kept the cut glass and
the crystal bowls just your way.
Eva Joy, I am mother now,
keeper of the silver spoons.

At Christmas I will fill your bowl,
the sparkling one--with fruit
arranging apples, oranges, grapes
carefully, like holding you in place.

LEADING RESOURCES

PLANTING THE ROSE TREE

Before the sun had risen high
she knelt in the wet grass carpet
and made a place large enough
for every yearning root.

She watered it amply and worried
when thunderheads clouded the sky.

Later the buds slowly opened
unfurling their satin shells.

She nuzzled their spicy fragrance
and wondered if anything so young
that blossomed in the sun
would ever know the night.

PATCH-QUILTED

Segments of the past fasten on us
like patches. Remember the time
we planted a tree on the side of
a bare hill? You made the place
and we both ran to get buckets of
water. You had the promise of a
young bird, all the eagerness and
daring of any boy chasing rabbits.
Our mother's face was a stream when
time swiftly caught and held you
in a warm September day.

The rest of us found our own maps
and every place we've lived has
memorized our faces.

The sky remembered to save the color
of your eyes and now we are here,
patch-quilted.

WANDERING

Weak from too many needles,
the hospital adopted her body
but never could enclose her mind.
She would say, "These hands are so idle;
they used to peel potatoes, bake bread."
Housework is something that never is done.
Sometimes wandering backward,
her room was the world.
She reminded us of bird songs,
life so full of broken lines.
And as she talked,
we cast our eyes down.

THE DIVIDING

LEARNING RESOURCES

SMALL TOWN LIFE

I've been a long time in leaving
small towns
where houses draw back
from narrow streets
 peering silently at passers by
yet they are not far from dirt roads
 that criss-cross the country side
separating cornfields from cow pastures.

Where as a small child I thrilled to see
 the water tower in our small town
 strung with colored lights and the
 Star of Bethlehem shining
 from the very top.

And I've been a long time in leaving
small towns
where people rise early and sip coffee
from thick mugs and speak of weather
 and tomato plants and the price of sugar
where there is nothing so full
 or so empty
 as a small town.

A GHOST TOWN OF OLD CARS

The sun glints hard
on the ghost town of old cars.
The mice have made nests
in their empty bodies.
Wild daisies and goldenrod
wind garlands
through rusty radiators.
Like a phoenix rising from its own ashes
their shadow skulks the desert.
Gorged in emptiness,
at night they feed
on slabs of ancient highways
melted down.

MEMORIAL DAY PARADE

A parade of people marching
wreathed in dull formality
like sleepwalkers moving
in a ritual of ashes.

Strange that they do not rage
or wonder if they should protest
against the avenues that lead
to a quiet shrine.

They attend in silence
asking nothing of the town
whose streets are running out
to nudge their dry grass edges.

THE GULL RIVER HOUSE

Many who pass the Gull River House
feel an ache to paint a portrait
of despair and desolation
dark above the road.

An abandoned hulk with loose shingles
hanging like patches
deep crevices scarring the boards.

It hasn't changed much in years;
the darker shades are deeper,
the muted ones more still.

The front yard splashed with wild flowers
red strawberries on the hill.

I've never been inside, but I think
there is a white porcelain sink
in the kitchen,
a bright, rag rug on the smooth oak floor,
a bowl of yellow daisies waiting
on the kitchen table.

SHALL I CLEAR THE ROOMS OF YOUR BECOMING?

I cannot count the times
you have glittered on my forehead,
 bright stones.

Moon people, I lifted you high
to ride on pretty carousels.

You knew my marshmallow center
and spoke in unison
of roller skates and red balloons
soda pop and clowns.

With your growing, the house bloomed--
an exotic flower.

I worshipped your victories;
stored blighted hopes securely
in the cellar.

Closets empty, the rock star poster
hangs forgotten on the wall,
 his pulsing beat suspended.

I stay in this house lead-footed;
lingering in a vacant shell.

Shall I clear the rooms of your becoming?
Plant red geraniums in every open window?

THE DIVIDING

When we last saw Aunt Rose
she was well,
cheeks like rare roast beef.

Next, she lay
prim and sedate
on a velvet couch.

When she had been assigned
to her solitary plot,
we folded up our grief
in hidden corners.

With blackbirds beating at the windows,
we swept in
stripping off the wrappers,
sorting out the pieces,
until it lay disheveled,
some old scrapbook
turn apart.

Then we took the pieces back
each to our own cave.

Now as I sip my tea,
I watch the antique mantle clock
and notice other things--
the hutch, the rings, the cups
that now are mine
and know they don't belong
to me, to me.

APART FROM HOLLOW PLACES

STANDARD INFORMATION CO.

APART FROM HOLLOW PLACES

I discovered this place years ago
concealed within a screen of pines,
a jewel of a lake,
where moss-covered rocks cling the shore.

An itinerant creek wanders through
between this beach and the islands
among dark tangles of seaweed,
engraving a fragile design.

Perfectly happy, I prowl the banks
for pieces of vagrant driftwood,
something with a jagged edge
or a crusty scar.

Apart from hollow places
my vision blurred by miles of trees,
I stumble over stones securely set
dazed by their fixed reality.

A DREAM OF DROWNING

Too close to crowds
and thinking
I am Neptune's child,
I leave my solid earth
to swim.
No prints are left behind.
I reach for any thread
or straw,
but water flows through
frantic hands
and toes probe mysteries
below.
How strange this world
of water,
there is no other thirst.
The lake is wine,
I drink and drink.

A RESURRECTION OF SPRING

The water shivers
under the spent ice
the nearly melted
the honey-combed.

In silent pools
fish lie awake
waiting a call
to encircle the lake.

A clear, gold spinning cry
quivers the earth
glaciers rise, foam white
slivered ice breaks.

Like a resurrection
sound waves reach out
chill numb goes
thick from finger tips.

Spring invites the world
urging tender shoots
stones shine bright
sharp as a morning star.

SAND BEACH SUMMER

Every summer it happens.
The flock of exiles come.
To the high cottages they come
to be the restless body
of the shore again.
Children with Kool-aid faces
and hair short-cropped for swimming.
Spendthrifts with time,
they pretend to be gliders
lighting on sand.
Sand that will stick to the skin
and last all summer.
They send out little boats
to search for happiness,
and even when school
pulls them out of summer,
the exiles still explore the caves
and taste the sands of fantasy.

A DREAM HE WILL HAVE

ALL OF HIS LIFE

A beam of the morning sun
is in his eyes
as he pushes the boat from shore.
The roar of his motor
makes all the fish
twitch in their beds.
A little smile hooks into the corner
of his mouth, as he baits the line.
He casts and retrieves--
mining the lake again and again,
the boat turning in rippling circles.
He is thinking of the greatest fish
struggling in sucking swirls
till it breaks the water
vaulting over the flecked surface
displaying a spectacular white belly.
Beaching the boat, my son knows
he will dream of this fish
all of his life.