



Paul Bower

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# Tom McAfee

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**HOW GOOD A POET** was Tom McAfee? Most of his friends really don't know. One of the newspaper obituaries said "his specialty was writing poetry and practical criticism." Actually, McAfee's specialty was people. He made friends not because he was a writer, but because he was a gentle, compassionate, unpretentious and interesting man. By all accounts, he also was an effective and caring teacher.

McAfee died Aug. 10, 1982 of lung cancer at the age of 54. He was born in Haleyville, Ala., and the soft, southern accent stayed with him all his life. He came to Mizzou as a freshman in 1946, received his master's in 1950, and spent two years in the army. McAfee returned to Campus in 1952 and had taught here since.

His life's priorities were simple. First, he said, he wanted to be a good person, then a good teacher, and, finally, a good poet.

Tom's territory revolved around the Campus and downtown Columbia. He seldom ventured far from Broadway. Tom didn't drive; in fact, he didn't even like to ride in a car or plane.

He lived at the Daniel Boone Hotel until it became the City-County Building. Then, he moved to the Tiger. The Velvet Lounge and the Three Cheers were his living rooms. And it was there that Tom met and made many of his friends. They came from all walks of life.

His students and former students regarded him with great esteem and affection. During those final, fearful days in the hospital, Tom was seldom without students and former students at his bedside.

His colleague in the English department, Larry Levis, also regards Tom highly as a poet. Levis, whose poetry has been published in the *New Yorker* magazine and who leaves for Europe next summer on a Guggenheim Fellowship, says that at his best, "Tom ranked right up there" with other contemporary poets. Levis mentions Donald Justice, Phillip Levine, George Garrett and even, Robert Penn Warren.

Tom, says Levis, was "desperately local. He saw no need to hang out with the literary crowd." But McAfee left several books of poetry, as well as a large number of unpublished works. And, notes Levis, it often takes two or three hundred years for a poet's audience to assemble.—  
*Steve Shinn*

From *The Tempo Changes. The Lights Go Up. The Partners Change.*, Larry Levis chose this poem as being representative of some of Tom McAfee's best work. The volume, published in 1978 by Singing Wind Publications, also marks the beginnings of McAfee's venture into narrative poetry.

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## What is Love?

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Walk with me now, I'll have the setting right:  
a pond, idyllic pasture, woods, an orange sun-  
down, breeze, quiet.

Now tell me what is love. I  
could conjugate hate. I could diagram cruelty.  
I thrive on lust. I could write an encyclopedia  
on the meaning of meanness, murder, *mal*.  
I don't know what is love. What is love?

1.

La Barucci, courtesan, hit hard times:  
Broke, consumption, the parties gone.  
Paul Demidoff, good man, in Paris,  
Paid her to sit in a good strong wind,  
And he would drown her with Seltzer water.  
Demidoff laughed. La Barucci coughed and was paid.  
Then, soon, *la Dame aux camelias* died.  
—Tell me, tell me. What is love?

2.

"Even such is Time which takes . . . in trust"  
our beauty.

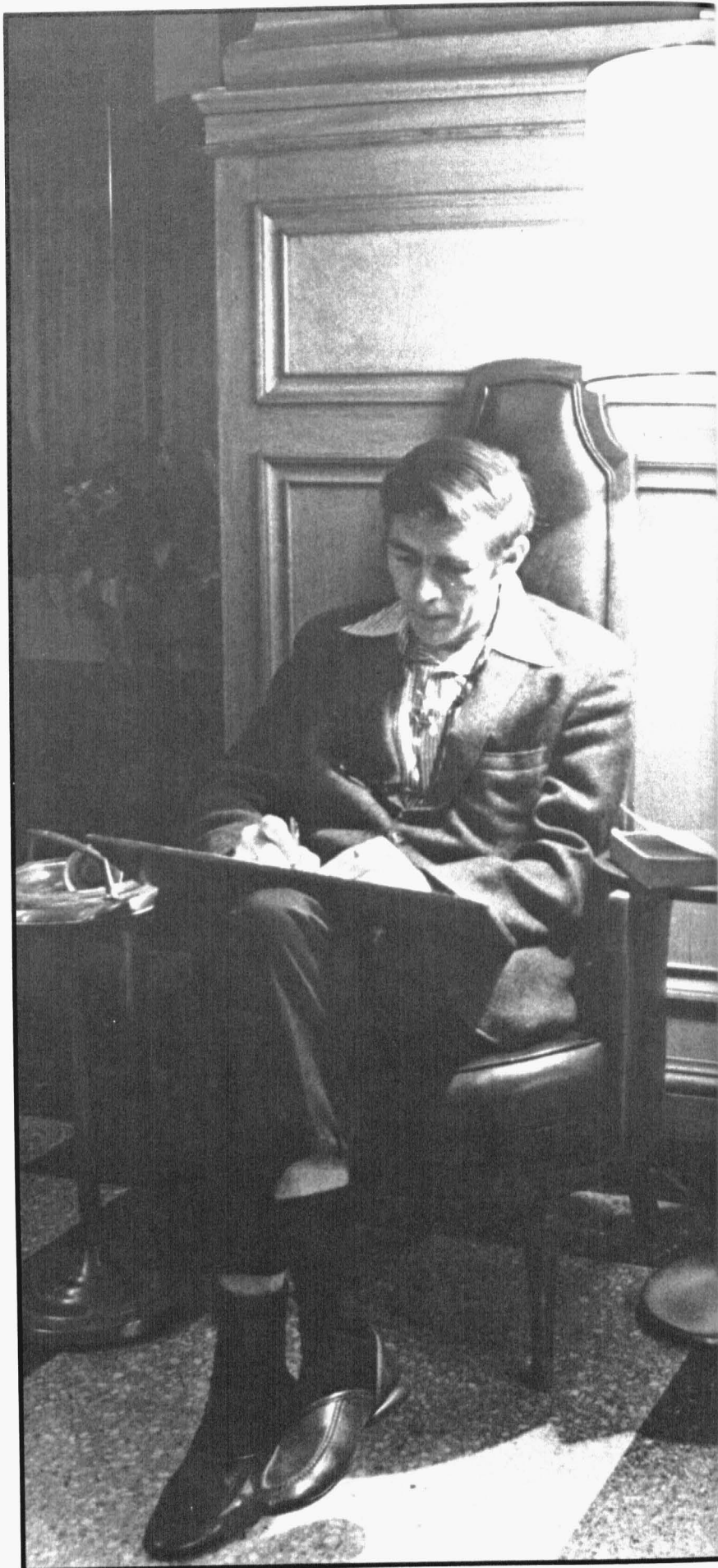
Would I love you scarred? Would I love you  
Lost in insanity? Or would I turn and go  
To some exotic place where beauty is always?  
Before you answer, What is love?

3.

The mother will kill for her babe.  
The father will kill for his friend.  
The lover will kill for his love.

Each one will walk away  
At the drop of a word.  
Each one will live in hate  
At the drop of a word.  
Tell me, What is love?

Even with this setting, you have not answered me.  
The sun is down. Night sounds come from the woods  
and from the pond. You have walked away.  
I stand in darkness with my question.  
The moon's false light comes on. Why did you  
not answer — at least, that you didn't know?



Columbia Missourian file photo

First published in the *Missouri Alumnus*, this poem made up half of one of the most popular spreads ever produced in this magazine. The other page was a photo by Bill Garrett, National Geographic editor.

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## The Columns and Jesse Hall

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I think I have more pictures  
Of the Columns and Jesse Hall  
Than I do of my 79-year-old father  
And my three mothers — all  
Of them put together. Views  
From the air, front, left. I used  
To think one picture (or two or three)  
Sufficient. Aren't they all about the same?  
Maybe once they were but not for me  
Anymore. It's important they remain,  
At a glance, what they were.  
But look closely, in the mind, and see  
What differences there are (to new  
Eyes, old or young) in each view.

*Chosen by student Mike White as one of Tom's "gentle" works, this poem is from the book, I'll Be Home Late Tonight, University of Missouri Press, 1967. The poem also demonstrates the special relationship Tom had with his father.*

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## Certain as the Mare My Father Gave Me

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Certain as the mare my father gave me,  
Certain as the country, winding ride  
Across the afternoon, was that small time  
Of quiet which I knew each night before  
My father said goodnight and turned from me.  
I remember one green afternoon  
Of summer when I rode my mare. We crossed  
The Old Pike's Bridge, and down below I saw  
A car-top. Only that above the water.  
I rode away from it into the hills.  
After I had put the mare away,  
Had eaten supper and undressed for bed,  
My father came to me and then I told  
About the car. And he made certainty  
That hour, and let me sleep with his goodnight.

Dedicated to a student, this poem was the one Tom requested to be part of his memorial service. It's the title work of a book published by Bk Mk, 1975.

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## The Body and the Body's Guest

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— to the memory of Dan Schroeder

I.  
A week five days in the grave, where are you? Time  
Is not real this time, except in parts, those parts  
That have to do with the necessary days: tolerable crime  
In the headlines, sleeping with pills, practising all the arts  
Of putting Time away, waking to nightmares, saying,  
"I can erase the time and the action and place, by praying."  
Simply praying. The *News* reminds me this is the dog days.  
My mind is touselled. Where do your atoms go? It rains,  
Is Sunday, as if it knew these are the ways  
We speak of grief. At last, what does Time do to the brain's  
Potential? No answer. The *News* says this is the dog days.  
Then Christmas, Easter . . . The *News* says this is the dog days.

II.  
Does anything move there, or sound, in that cemetery  
I haven't seen? Here, in another climate, now, all the sound  
Is a gentle rain, on the roof and on the pond, and frogs  
Off there at the far bank of the pond. Your heart is stopped,  
Could it be there is silence exact, with no one to stroll  
By the graves, and hear his own heart toll? I would pay  
Someone to stroll always; for rain; for insect sounds.  
I would pay resurrected saints to toll the bell, walk the grounds.

III.  
Morning. The sun, somehow, is out again,  
Festooning, you'd like to think, and the vague, dedicated man  
Across the street power-mows his lawn. You don't hear.  
Here is a wide room of parochial waking up. Fear  
And trembling were last night, today are words,  
With the cigarettes and coffee and the waking, and birds  
Outside amazed at the grass. All is not well,  
You learn, as the sleep wears off, and the dead one starts to tell  
What it's like, and you think you know, already, too well.

IV. ANOTHER MORNING.  
Can the first light be killing, dawn, awakener, when  
Closed blossoms open and furled fronds unfurl  
And the mist lifts from the pond and the horses and  
Cattle go about their business and the man still struck  
With sleep attunes himself to the sun? Perhaps you look  
At the sky and long for the troubled sleep, even  
The nightmares that left you sweating. For this is truly  
A Death Parade, each thing, from spider to rose,  
A testament of death. The first light is a signal  
To the last. First light, the voices from the grave are deafening.

V.  
The sun is merciless, the air is worse after rain, those  
Flowers are blooming that seem to thrive on disaster:  
Marigolds, zinnias, petunias. Summer, mindless, goes  
Doggedly towards something — we, waiting and grieving, prefer  
Towards something, if we must wait and grieve by those  
Flowers we would not pull, and would not take to the grave.  
At noon the dead, attacked by the sun, seem to close  
Their mouths and sleep, for they, though brave  
And living the final disaster, consumed, chose  
Nothing, or little, and live confused in space  
And among tree roots. Walking earth's green, perhaps they chose  
This final disaster, which goes on, and will erase  
Their eyes and feet. No matter, now, at noon, what they chose.

VI.  
Finally, and finally, and finally, we come to this:  
The dead one lies in the grave, the motion we knew  
Is gone, the enduring face is gone, the brain  
Is rotted away, the odor of the corpse would leave  
Us blind and sick. All our philosophies, Einsteinian  
Leaps, our faith and hope do not recall the voice.  
As it was, that we knew. The laughter is lost.