

Climbing the Divide

Walt McDonald

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Over a long, illustrious career the author has practiced and nearly perfected what might be called a Texas plain style. Without fuss or pyrotechnics, his poems draw readers into a life both unexceptional and extraordinary, made so by the vitality of his poetic language and his salty, engaging persona. One beautiful poem remembers his mother in a home movie with equal amounts of nostalgia and irony: "My God! she was lovely, our father / breathless for twenty seconds, / her hair glossy dark, her body shapely // before children, before any of us."

In "This Could Be Eden" the irony is stronger, as images of a gorgeous morning in the Rockies are balanced against others of a hiker mauled by a grizzly and of schoolchildren, perhaps classmates of his beloved grandchildren, "with dustcoats / over grudges no one knows, but burning to show the world." The everyday world of these poems is peaceful, one of ranching in Texas, hiking in Montana, and memories of a mainly happy childhood. Yet the awareness of violence always lurks; as McDonald says, "Vietnam is always a fact-there it is, / even in dreams." More distant and more recent wars, in the Philippines and Bosnia, temper and complicate any leanings toward sentimentality. "I wonder if Orville and Wilbur / thought about bombs and rockets / when they launched facedown," a poem written near Kitty Hawk muses; "We face the east where our son flies // thousands of stars from here, / hot coffee cooling as we sip, / nothing to see but miles of dark / and white caps crashing down."

Such unaffected, unforced writing is much easier to admire than to achieve. Many poets would make more of such a scene, and a great deal more of their own suffering, but McDonald, whose poems have been published in *The American Scholar*, *The Atlantic Monthly*, and *London Review of Books*, knows when to stop, and how to strengthen a poem by leaving out what is unnecessary. Like feathers, his poems have both lightness and strength; he understands the poetic virtue of understatement and the human virtue of humility. These are not experimental poems; they are deeply, originally traditional, and just as deeply accomplished.

JEFF GUNDY (March / April 2003)

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