SELECTED POEMS by Norman Macleod



Ahsahta Press Boise State University Boise, Idaho

Versions of some of the poems contained in this volume have appeared in The Golden Stallion; Horizons of Death; A Man In Midpassage; Northwest Verse; A Regional Anthology; Pure As Nowhere; Thanksgiving Before November; We Thank You All The Time.

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Introduction

Norman Wicklund Macleod was born in Salem, Oregon, in 1906. To-day, nearly seventy years later, he resides on the other side of the continent, in Pembroke, North Carolina, where he teaches at Pembroke State University and edits **Pembroke Magazine**.

For over fifty years, Macleod's contributions to literature have been noteworthy. His poetry has been published in the most important periodicals here and abroad; he has founded and/or edited some of the leading "Little Magazines" of the century in America and Europe; he has published several novels; and he has encouraged numerous literary hopefuls as founder of the New York City Poetry Center and as a teacher at a number of schools and universities.

Although Macleod's published volumes of verse are available from Xerox University Microfilms, these volumes do not contain all of the poems Macleod has published in periodicals or in anthologies. And, many of the poems in these volumes have been revised in Macleod's unpublished collection of old and new verse entitled "Adam's Off Ox."

From his published volumes and his verse contained in periodicals and anthologies, as well as the works in his unpublished manuscript, the poet has graciously allowed the Ahsahta Press to select the 33 poems which comprise this collection. With few exceptions, the editor has chosen to print the most recent version of a given poem, *i.e.*, that found in "Adam's Off Ox." These selected poems have been synthetically grouped in order to correspond with the poet's life, specifically, his domiciles in the Rocky Mountains, the Southwest, Europe, and the East Coast. This method of grouping, of course, often provides only a superficial coherence, for it does not always indicate precisely when a particular poem was composed. For example, the last poem, "The Coffin of Print," was written in the 1930's, while most of the other poems in Section IV were written in Washington, D.C., circa 1950.

However, until we have the volume we really need, the **Collected Poems of Norman Macleod**, it is our hope that the **Selected Poems** will allow readers to appreciate, at least to some degree, the unique talents and accomplishments of this poet from the West.

Tom Trusky Boise State University June, 1975

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Ring Around The Syringas: 1920

Along the Clark Fork of the Columbia
The shooting stars were out of purple ground, rockSharpened rain-teeth in the sky:
A man may have died in Hellgate canyon but the odor
Of his brandy breath remains, mackinawFrosted in rabbit weather.

Aunt Crystal, who
Of all my aunts was the favorite—
Who raised radishes and planted pears
With equal relish
On her ranch in the mountains
And who, alone of the rest, rode
With her heel-heft in the iron hide:
The mare's flat ear pointed—
Until

My Uncle Will came along—
A fine friend when the forest would let him—
But hot for the Ku Klux Klan
And that was why
My Uncle Morgan
Was angry, his alfalfa going to seed
And Debs on the gramaphone and his wife, my Aunt
Candace, wild with worry

And his son, Aubrey, A queer duck doctoring his warts With milkweed, packing his prospector's kit Into the jasper mountains (the spitting Image of his father: could spit Tobacco juice like a grasshopper).

But when Morgan slapped down Uncle Will for riding around In bedsheets with the K.K.K.—
The summer sour in his belly—
Father and son set out for gold in the mountains

And Uncle Will Retreated to Crystal's ranch, Where Glenette (his last born) under the rocker Was uttering her first-born cries: and all of us Cluttering the kitchen With our eyes.

And Crystal heard
How
Uncle Will
Would be a forest ranger
Come next week and never
Speak to anyone again, the chipmunks
Calling him, and his wounded pride
A band-aid to protect his hate.

But

The radishes, peaches, the potatoes: Embarrassed strawberries even— Anyhow, it would soon be snow, The frost of late September on the sun And rusty carrots nailed into the bin,

For a man Has served his marriage well, Come children to the woodshed, their blistered Behinds—

But Uncle Morgan was lost To Candace, Debs and socialism, Digging for gold in the mountains

While along the Bitterroots
The ducks were out and soon it would be
Venison weather.

I buttoned My stag-Shirt Over my heart.

Fishing In Summer

We went fishing in summertime with our legs Thigh deep in rubber. Along the rapid streams We waded through the shallows (while minnows Scurried out of sight) and snaked our flies. Brilliant with color in sunlight, over bushes And water like brambles leaping over rocks And boulders until they settled into the whirl-Pools: the fish bit on anything that looked Like food, and we returned to the camps With our baskets laden with catch (the Squirming silver): we slivered their bellies With knives and knuckled their scarlet And emerald guts from the spine until their bodies Were pared to flesh and the mouths gaped With their eyes bulging. With bacon and soot From brindled fires we tasted the flavor, And then reclined against the trunks of trees As the coals of the fire were dying, smoking Our pipes and gazing at stars as the night Enclosed the valleys with darkness.

Evening Above The Snake

At Weiser our sweaters were a sunset for the evening As we leaned against the railings of the bridge Over the Snake River. The park on the island Was a wanness of electric lights, and the bushes Were a distillation of love. We were tired Of shooting bee-bee guns and were too young to drink. We smoked cigarettes as a gesture of manhood And bolstered the breast with our breath, Proud of our prowess in athletics. It must have been risky

To pass the blaze of our sweaters at dark.

Huckleberry Camp In Idaho

We went camping in huckleberry time, our wagons Jolting blue in out of the way forests. The high Pines were stately pillars in the altitude Of the mountains. The trails were a seepage Of melting snow and the flowers put back the time Of the year on the snowline. High prairies Of beargrass were a pasture for the caravans Of sheep and collies were the rivals of wolves And coyotes. Sometimes we found a stray sheep Foundered in the gulley and we would roast it By evening and camp by the smell of its flesh Singed by the fire. At dawn we would be up And away with coffee within us. No breakfast Could taste as good as it did in the mountains. Our speech would be clear as the sparkle of frost, And related to our age and the hour. We came to know each other as the deer And remained unfrightened. The nights were cold With the aromatic cedar of boughs beneath us And we tasted the needles of pine to clean Our teeth and we boiled like a sweatbath In the hot water mineral springs of the hills.

The Reaping Of Oats

The oats were grey in the upland pasture And high as the chest of a roan stallion.

Gophers had holed in the earth, the oats A forest above them. We set badger traps

And harnessed the mares for the harvest. After mowing, we sat under chokecherry

Trees and wolfed our lunch in the shade. When we had finished the shocks, it was

Near sunset. We unharnessed the mares— Led them down to the barn. We fed them

And washed ourselves in a running brook From the orchard. The farmhouse was hot

With yellow lamplight and after the boy Had brought the milk we poured it into

Separators. Our dinner was a sustained Happiness of the body and we lolled at

Table with tobacco smoke curling above Us: we thought of the day and tomorrow.

Against Winter

The damp fetlocks of horses swished Upon dew. We cracked whips warily

In early consciousness of sunshine On the fields. The hayricks creaked

Over hump and hillock as we steadied Ourselves on pitchforks in the hay.

Though the smell of harvest was good The dust was a fine spray from the

Summer ended— we wheezed heavily (Like horses) with red bandannas

To the face. It was good to be Working— the sweat rolling free

And the sun in its annual orbit. We came to know the seasons of the

Calendar, reckoned up during our Forefathers' thrifty lifetimes

And our own. At the end of autumn We barricaded the home valleys,

Rueful of winter, and started out To the forests, feet against snow

And axes aslant our foreheads.

We Played The Flatheads At Arlee

From miles around the Indians came to see us Play basketball against the Flatheads at Arlee. The stakes were high and the floor narrow— The Indians wore their black hair parted, Drawn back sharp as the split edge of a tomahawk From both sides of the copper forehead.

The game was angry— Never until the dead end were we Sure of winning.

But if they lost,

We knew it had not always been their habit To be losing.

Never had basketball on a Jesuit court Been a game of their own choosing.

Fort Bridger

At Fort Bridger the grass had grown into walls Crumbling with no sense of monumental decay

And the parade ground was a range for cattle. Where the wells were a silence of oaken buckets

The windlasses were creaking with Wyoming winds. There were memories of Jim Bridger and grey-

Bearded Indian fighters, and the stories told About them hung upon the stockades like moss

In a heavy redolence of forest when the rains Came down. The highway curved to either side

Like a white path of moonlight, and the town Was composed of pool-halls for sheepmen and

Cattle-ranchers. They fought forgotten battles Of the range, and the old hatreds were carried

With them. The dance-halls were dimly lighted Until the early hours of morning whenever the

Girls came from as far away as Green River. Their faces were tired as prairies at sundown

And not even the paint of their lips could be As wild as an Indian war-cry. They were pallid

With hard traditions behind them, and even In love they were weak as cows in a storm.

The Bitterroots

In the Bitterroots were sapphire mines And ticks were a menace to the cattle.

I followed the myths of mica and gold And shared flapjacks with the grizzled

Prospectors. The cabins were of spruce And pines were a forest along horizon.

The bald bench of the black mountains Was above the snowline and ptarmigans

Were a thin white silence in the hills. The beavers gnawed the edge of winter

Where jackrabbits zigzagged along the Creek bottoms. My mackinaw camouflaged

A stag shirt and my breath was a frost Sparkling like the skies on a blue day.

I hunted beneath the ridges for sheep And the trails led from one cabin to

Another: there were no women for me To look upon. The mountain men were

Starved from a wariness of body hunger Until their skulls encased a hardness

No possible cold could ever penetrate — I warmed my hands at many fires.

R.R. Yards

At night we walked in the darkness to work In the railroad yards, switching engines

And greasing pistons in the shops. The lights Above the tracks were heavy and never struck

The steel rails without gongs ringing signals. The scarlet and emerald lanterns were myriad

Against the buildings. Our brows were sweaty And our hands greased with labor. We always

Left at dawn. We could not stand it for long, Sleeping in the daytime and working at night

When the girls were dancing in auditoriums. We quit soon afterward— it was no time

For us to be slaves: we were young And many nights were before us.

Twentieth Century Bucking Bronco

At thistle junction, the schist bolsters the sky up tracing a cerulean triangle to match the earth; and the passenger trains come through a grey of granite with business and salesladies announced with an extra fine cuisine, but strangely unheralded the hoboes ride like cowboys holding her down.

Bohobodom

Panguitch is a godforsaken hole Biff Sullivan and me Stopped over for the night Once last October A lady give us grub And over at the pool hall We snagged some cigarettes In consequence the both of us Was feeling quite expansive Then Biff drags out a Pascal We'd swiped in Salt Lake City And give his stuff an air The fellow was a high brow though With words as wide as Texas Disgusted with his hooey We turned in for a flop Inside a barn, But 'long towards eleven Or thereabouts Tin cans was raining on us Like shacks upon a freight train The town evinces public spirit Says Biff, so we evacuated With dignity of course And leaves for Cedar City Las Vegas, and all points south . . . God ain't been around much in Utah Or Panquitch.

Coniferous

(Petrified Forest, Arizona)

Rusted with iron And manganese, They are no longer Trees.

Carborundum And diamond dust Have illustrated An agate crust.

From centuries Of primitive, Only inanimate May live.

Alternately, I have chosen: Better decay Than be frozen.

Impression

they get pools
of sapphire with diamond dust in
eyes, where nevada runs like
asphalt . . . centipedelike
trains crawl on spatial
infinitude, they get that way
o when crank sky of lemon
sways dizzily
and dust clouds rise;
not even sahuara prays for man
where salt waves heap
horizon . .
purity of bones,
you decorate the octoroon land.

Cattle-Town

sprawling like a drunk sailor in a maritime saloon; cattle town gone wrong, weep sister a cattle rutting hellshotted town gone wrong, the santa fe reeking with capitalism and smug cigars invades after the drouth they built hotels respectable, eating houses representable and telegraph wires buzzed where only roundup bellowings challenged the waste before America came with money, wild west stories.

Escarpment

Tequila of the moon can be More liquid to the taste And drenching to aridity Than rain on desert waste; Pungent as a sagebrush fire The winds are flowing west, Edges like a cholla spire, Eleven score abreast; Labor of the loam has built A fortress on each wing And giant cacti, on the silt Of buttes, are signalling.

Savage Country

Up into the north for some to know Warmth of red on cold snow, And a splinter of pine To fracture a cross Set by a penitente.

Mountains with a blue gaunt Paralysis.

The country is more than you can be, A hedonism of color Strained to stretch with pain: An animism Of rock,

Blue with painted savages.

Stride On The Desert

The desert is a long way in a day's journey. One ridge is cut from the pattern of

The arroyo before it.

There is much time to wrap with my thoughts

A blanket around me. The pace of the sand is as certain

As my stride on the desert. I hollow my life and pick up the fragments.

I hold myself within the grip of my arms. In firelight there is space for my smoke

To rise into starlight.

Morning or evening there is no yellow wind

Like my sorrow. I do not speak Of this to another.

There are buttes and monuments for my grief: I am no stronger than they are.

Navajo Mountain Chant

Clothed in a sheet of daylight I walk Far between mountains.

Here I remember the song of freedom unspeakable On liberated air.

The purple peaks that are crested with pollen of heaven (The flower of sun that blooms in the turquoise air),

And I know that the mountains are fastened to earth By the hard blue jagged arrow of lightning

(And cannot move) and yet come closer to heaven Than I who would walk

To the foot of the rainbow to ascend Farther than the reach of mountains,

But the color moves on rapid feet Into a shadow of atmosphere

Before I come. The desert curves Over the rounded surface of day

And the horizontal yellow fades into the blanket of night. In the clear cool shine the mountains loom.

Blue with the color of lightning, flower lnto the garden of night.

And far below I walk no longer with gods: Only the darkness of desert.

There is only my faltering stride.

The Ptarmigans Of Winter

Ptarmigans of winter are on the Truchas Peaks And the Sangre de Cristos bleed with snow.

The yellow pines are the warblers of sunset Where the blue spruce shadows the sky.

While the sumac stains the clouds, Cougars are a cry the wind remembers.

Given the season, turkeys are wild in the cedars And elk track the drift of blossoming winter.

There is no smoke upon the mountains But the ptarmigans are one

With the Truchas Peaks in December, The arroyos a silent movement of snow.

Before We Were Lost In The Mountains

Our snowshoes were saffron webs to take us across Frontiers and the tracks were our lives together.

We looked behind and though the start was obscure The parallel had split the horizon. We struck out

For camp in protected hollow and remained as long As cedar boughs would allow or the coffee lasted.

The elk was savory to the tongue for we flavored Meat with smoke of pine: it was a rare health for

Our bodies. Those were the days of our hardihood: We were stronger than a silence behind the years.

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Mill Workers

After work with the whine of machinery In the sawmill, the green sound of lumber Splitting to steel was a nightmare For our thought. We stumbled to the barracks, Soaped our bodies with anger and rinsed

Our eyes of sawdust and felt like a dipper Battered and uncontained. At supper We were ravenous and our hands were a web To snare the food. Afterwards We smoked on the porch and watched

Folk walking the roads of the milltown To pool-halls. Some would be having White mule in their veins, but we Were too tired. We could not speak For sleep that was heavy on our brains.

The barracks would be odorous With the sweat of our bodies, Contaminated by the mill, and after a night Of restless slumber, we would be going Our way again to the sheds,

And the whistles blowing.

We did not have time to think

Of our exploitation except on Sunday,
But then we met as workers

To organize a strike like men.

Item, Alexander Macleod, Soviet Citizen

Take this pink paper and from there recall How in the Revolution's recessional Alexander Macleod came up from Alma Atai, The duplex of his deep bronze shoulders Riding his crutches like rocking horses,

And he picked me up at the New Moscow Hotel Across the river from the Kremlin towers And took me down to the underground With legend in his heart like flowers.

They have carried the old Bolsheviks
In neat squares like peat to the fire:
I wonder what happened to Lydia
Who spied on leftwing foreigners?
The peevoh we drank, Alexander and I,
Was like green running water.

But the world is dead I remember And Alexander dropped out of sight:

I should like to say a few words, I'd like to put his name in the record.

Invitation To Tajikistan: 1933

Good that we never traveled to Tajikistan: Golden desert in the mind's eye, Miraculous lakes and dream portents Of happiness. On camels of time We swayed the hunchback of the years In flow of rhythmical forgetfulness, Quiet and resigned. (My mortal friend Was an enemy, laughing in the face of us.) What was it which might have been? On the Gobi, acquainted with dancers Of death, flurries of wind held festival. Forsaking the life behind our tears . . . Our lips were chapped by a bitter wind. I can believe you pleaded for the black Sheep of the flock, laughed down And mortified. The typhus swept the south. There is such a country known (In the grain of belief), dedicated To the transmigration of souls.

Ale Drinking In A Pub

Nothing like fine English hostelries For exquisite ale of doubt: no foam,

A scatter of bubbles subsidual in glass Roundly placed to the lip's dark mood

Reviling the hate in a face of fire— Remember how our thoughts have been!

Let us take Scotland to dig graves (Our ancestors before us) and though

Worship is out of manner, it is best To be buried with a father's bones.

Subway

I had moose thoughts in the darkness Crippled in the valleys of my mind And hamstrung with experience

Shot so that the blood was a wound For my head and the night a bandage To cover up my body—

I sat with hands crossed like a promise While the python was a silver noise In the tunnels beneath the city.

I had no time to discover what lay Between the mountains and the ocean. There were no birds to fly

With the seasons between one country And another. If I did not move It was because I did not know

My destination: one stop Was as good as another.

from: Footnote To These Days

I. Bellevue Hospital: 1934

If you could have straight speech with your sorrow -

Overlooking the East River, the sunlight soft Upon it, and factory stacks rising as if From the huge hulk of an ocean liner docked As I am, tethered to the wharf of my past. The contemplation of no new journeys Hoists the anchor. The silence Of psychopathic wards imprisons the nerves. Futility weighs us down and we watch The stereoptic life of the East River: Shadows detached from the sun, cold air In the blue nostrils of steamships. So much to be forgotten! If you could have Straight speech with your sorrow —

Caught in sudden silence One screams and cannot scream, Reaching out for sympathy To the warm arms (And his hands beside him).

II. Journey Imagined

The strife to live more fully permits no victory: Even the memory of youth is burdened with defeat, And we wonder at myths of happiness Related in childhood. It was a lie we lived — deceit engulfed our years. The interludes of life were isolated. Countries left and loves foregone, faded as memory. All anger could not move us, and we yearned For quiet valleys with bread and cheese, The simplicities of sleep.

Thanksgiving Before November

The evening fire has gone up the chimney To mingle with the anonymity of stars, The dust of loneliness stirring the ashes Over the Persian rug, the cradle Of the easy chair: dispensary of comfort, Ceased of rocking: come to a full Stop like the interim of tomorrow In the bedroom of my neighbor's wife. There is torpidity of pain and worry Over the grocery store across The corner. The towels of the bath Are carefully arranged, the mat Waiting: the coffee pot takes the image Of a samovar for study at night. The slow wind on the mire of the earth Pokes questioningly at the strange House of a man with no qualms. Next Saturday the butcher's boy And the query of icemen. They change So often the face of Nowadays. It is hard to recognize an aunt When she comes bearing cousins To dinner upon Thanksgiving Day And the slow querulous quest Of the genealogy of fathers.

The Pigeons In The Park, Alas

With hand upon my son's head, I Can feel his brain vibrating, so Together we walk past the maimed Trees surrounding the Capitol in

November. Big lie's harlot flags Announce the approaching Siberia Whose army will police the mind: Please, daddy, up (he says) out

& beyond. A country in cold fury Combines to elect its own death. I lower his life to walk beside The frozen monuments. The plaza

Still is warm & pigeons indicate The nervous state of unfettered Impulse, & my son's applauding Innocence kisses their pavement.

Like Chief Joseph The Nez Perce

Since I can no longer remember the poems of my youth (nor even

the five fingers which brought them to birth) I recognize that

I am issue of a lean length of men whose serial inheritance is

taxed by time, deep distortion or anger until the man I now am

is less memory than shadow: so like Chief Joseph the Nez Perce

I see the receding saw of rock roaring in a cataract to sunset

breathe the bitterroot valleys and touch with despair a tender

ness that is not anywhere, and tasting the larkspur of retreat

hear the black drums reminding tomorrow the son I then will be

will renounce not only the men who were his anchor in the past

but also his race, name, those poems he will never know: there

fore he will die as I will die grey as the ultimatum motorized

transport move upon, atomizing our tablet in this world's mind.

The Frozen Auk

Archaic editor of Eskimaux, the moon Rises over a snarled thread of my belief

& maundering like a bled bedeviled wind Edging an urge of a fat river's meander

Or snow buried never to be placered on By any sharp April rain, mining itself

In unventured darkness but to confound The skeleton pressed delicate in fossil

Between iced frond & the processed rock. The needle now shouts to no pole of fire

Kneading a knot that tied the phallus In the anthropology of a mother womb.

The tree rings tell of no hot Alexander Yet the blue sheep, my myth ancestral,

Are frozen belled as eye of the needle Not even children can pass through on

Their way to heaven. I am a nihilistic Snow ghosted hope & gibberish of rain

That will never April any air, & that Anonymous itch in slaver of Kodiak bear

& needle stitching battle everywhere, Phallus to font, sorry peals of rumor

Disruptive gold rush will never seek. Like a roasted auk forsaken in cellar

My memory canceled & will never speak.

The Dead

I have been murdered or have killed Myself: in any case, I am the dead

How shall I speak using your lips That lie to themselves, take stock

Of a whip lashed around the heart? All of us were there at the start

And who was successful in the mind Then failed through some kindness

Who shall learn from love's recoil Or lose in the hatred of her soul?

The dead are not so lonely as rock When far distributed beyond shock

And yet will settle into the bone Or blood of those who were wrong

As all are who seek peace in war Which leaves none unaccounted for.

The Coffin Of Print

After the rhythms of anger Have frozen into print,

The stark line faces the fact And stares it down—

No longer does the heart leap Unlionized and lean,

But stripped of emotion Lies down between

The curt cartoon
And the political comment—

For these are the zombies With blood in print.

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Ahsahta Press

MODERN & CONTEMPORARY POETRY OF THE AMERICAN WEST

*David Baker, Laws of the Land
Conger Beasley, Jr., Over DeSoto's Bones
Linda Bierds, Flights of the Harvest Mare
Richard Blessing, Winter Constellations
*Peggy Pond Church, New & Selected Poems
Wyn Cooper, The Country of Here Below
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Richard Speakes, Hannah's Travel
Genevieve Taggard, To the Natural World
*Marnie Walsh, A Taste of the Knife
Bill Witherup, Men at Work
*Carolyne Wright, Stealing the Children

Women Poets of the West: An Anthology, 1850-1950

^{*}Selections from these volumes, read by their authors, are available on *The Ahsahta Cassette Sampler.*