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We are a boorish set, they tell us-  
Hard-bitten, coarse of feature and speech,  
Shallow and brawling as the mountain streams,  
With morale friable as our sandstone.

All my life I have wanted to tell them:  
That we are mountain people,  
That mountain streams have pools of deep quietness,  
And that beneath the sandstone of our hills  
There is granite. (33)*

With such insight and keen powers of observation, this quiet mountain poet captured the spirit of the world of nature as well as the hearts of his own people in his many brief verses written over a span of five decades.

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Were I so lucky to have had a son  
Predestined to express himself in verse,  
My duty to him never could be done  
To help alleviate his natal curse.

To fly, the swift must alternate his wings,  
Not synchronize them, as the other birds;  
So, too, the human maverick who sings,  
For each defies conventions of the herds.

For were my son poetic, gay, or blind-  
No matter what the difference, by name-  
The Philistines would jeopardize his chance  
To speak convictions of his heart and mind;  
No wound hurts more when one is not to blame,  
No sin more deadly than intolerance. (56)

Without support and encouragement, the poet often retreats all the more into himself. Tate viewed his poetic talent as a curse from birth, a curse he could not escape. It sprang from nature's making him a "maverick" as he says in the poem. To live with that difference from other people is painful enough, but to live without the appreciation and acknowledgment of those closest to him was even more painful. His mother apparently never failed him, and because of her loyalty he was determined to do nothing to engender her disappointment in him. During his three years of military service when he flew nearly a thousand missions over Morocco, Algeria, Corsica, and southern France, he was reluctant to let his mother know the fears and uncertainties experienced by servicemen. In a poem written from Tunisia and apparently in response to one of her inquiries, he said,

Your letter wants to know if soldiers weep . . .  
How can I answer so you understand?  
Surely the submarines that haunt the deep  
Gave us a fear we never knew on land,  
And here, where days are as so many years,  
Where we are ever pitted against death-  
This is no time to dim our sight with tears,  
Here words are but a wasting of the breath.
Yes, soldiers weep. And let me speak for all:
We shall not cry to give our heart release,
Nor when we hear them read the scroll of fame:
It will be after we, beyond the call
Of duty, have secured the lasting peace.
It will be when I hear you speak my name. (54)

One other poem influenced by his mother reminds the reader of the means of sending messages during the war; this one is called "V-Mail to God":

Forgive me when my letters say I'm well,
And take everything in easy strides;
And please, for Mother's sake, don't ever tell,
She wouldn't like it if she knew I lied.

I cannot take her face within my hands
Or smooth her hair, or kiss her tired eyes;
Nothing to send her from these foreign lands
But reassurance through my little lies.

Dear Master, it was she who told me first
Of You-that You could heal the blind and lame,
That You had pity for a soul accursed,
Your grace was all-sufficient for his shame.
So when I lie to shield her from the worst
Oh, please don't write it down against my name! (119)

The tenderness of his devotion to his mother rings through such poems with an intensity of emotion but always stopping short of sheer sentimentality. The reader must be impressed with the genuineness in his concerns and in his openness.

Tate enjoyed the sonnet form, writing many of his poems in that concise and structured manner, including one section of eighteen sonnets appearing under the title "The Unfound Door: Unrhymed Sonnets." The terseness and orderliness of the sonnet appear in these but without the deliberateness and predetermined rhyme scheme the ear has learned to anticipate. Beyond his interest in the sonnet, most of his other poems are done in a simple lyric form. Rhyme follows a fairly consistent pattern.

Among his numerous nature poems, Tate has preference for the fall of the year and especially for the month of October. This last observation is evident in the book's title poem, "All the Lost Octobers." In that verse and many of his other poems, a sadness deriving from the failure to recognize and to appreciate the beauty of the lost seasons haunts the speaker. Those times of brilliance blended with the sadness for their neglect pass by without proper respect for what is now gone.

One of the most intriguing parts of the collection must be the large number of poems devoted to some unnamed or otherwise unidentified love. According to family accounts, Tate fell in love with a young woman during the war.
While she apparently inspired many of these poems, there is no indication she is the lone inspiration. According to family members, "Jonquils," written in Algeria, is one of the poems with the young woman as the focus:

We met them as we climbed the lovely hill:
Children, with jonquils in their hands and hair;
They smiled at us—the grass was green and still,
For it was spring, with jonquils everywhere.
Upon the hill we stopped: you took my hand,
The wind made all the jonquils dance and sway;
Something there was we did not understand—
So much we felt, so little could we say.

Sometimes I wake and find it still is true:
My dream was but a dream, and it may be
That all I left unsaid that day to you
May not be spoken till eternity.
Yet always in my heart, and in the air
There will be spring, with jonquils everywhere. (63)

With no specific dates to identify the composition of these obviously very personal poems, the reader can only speculate as to the persona addressed. Since "Jonquils" indicates its place of composition, the date is narrowed down a bit. But others offer no such clues. Yet, several poems are filled with the same intense affection and emotion, some based on a lost love and some stressing the poet's own unfailing love. "The Day Was Autumn" begins with the lines "I thought of you today, for in my heart / The echo of your words will ever be, / Although you tore my universe apart / The day you took your love away from me" (80). As for his own constancy, he offers marked evidence in "When I Have Ceased to Love You":

When I have ceased to love you, not again
Will breath of lilacs through my open door
Bring tears for vanished Aprils; nevermore
Will mountains, seen through stripes of silver rain,
Challenge my soul, in happiness or pain
To greater heights; nor will I then explore
Old depths of beauty I had known before
The light went out in hand and heart and brain.

So this you may remember, dear, and know;
My slightest word or deed is but a token
Reminding you, through days that come and go,
Love does not fade, however cold and broken
The heart may be, nor can it die, although
All deeds be done, and every word be spoken. (81)

Religious allusions and themes appear in a number of his poems as well as some surprising references to modern social problems. In the poem "Precedent" Tate combines a tribute to Mary the mother of Jesus with his own comment on the legalization of abortion. The poem begins with this quatrain:
In olden times there was a gentle maid
Whose purity had never been betrayed;
She lived a pious life, and in her plan
Was faithful to a certain righteous man.

After telling in poetic lines the announcement by Gabriel and the acceptance of that message by Joseph, Tate concludes the poem:

There were no marriage counselors to see,
No wish with God's design to disagree,
And so she waited, till she felt the grip
Of labor pains while on a business trip.

It was ordained that no obstetric knife
Should break the precedent of right to life;
Where would we be, had Mary been a cynic,
With credit cards at some abortion clinic! (121)

One rather brief poem addresses space exploration and explains that God's will must be considered as man reaches out to the stars.

Select any star in the firmament-dim it, conceal it, or bind it,
Keep it obscure, commonplace as a granule of sand,
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For one who kept his own lawn, bemoaned any cut tree or wildflower, never owned a car much less learned to drive one, maintained the quiet life he was born to, Tate seems indeed the "anachronism" Caldwell calls him in his preface to the published poems. Perhaps it is no longer possible for such a man to live in the modern world and eschew all the demands of modernity. Tate explained his aversion to city life and its demands when he wrote "Thoughts from a City":

What is there here to wake the heart to sing?
Captive in concrete, city trees all stand
Waiting for earthquakes, and on every hand
Men against steel-their crying all day long.

Rumble and clang . . . the noises of the street . . .
Louder than any human cry is loud,
Till all identity within this crowd
Is lost among the surge of restless feet.

Yet some day, not too long distant, I will go
Upward to mountain heights-to lyric flow
Of lonely streams. Bareheaded, in the breeze,
Rest eyes, like tired birds, on greening trees;  
Cooling my face against unfevered stone return,  
O heart of mine, unto our own! (18)

That return to the mountain and its comforting assurance renewed him daily. He understood the misperceptions of mountain people that brought mockery and pity, but he also knew the depth of hearts in tune with the natural and real world. He heard the music and knew the peace of his environment. And he wanted so much to let others hear that music and share that peace, if only through his verbal depictions. As he explained in "Mountain People," he knew those on the mountain were often described as "boorish," "hard-bitten," "coarse," "shallow and brawling." But he wanted readers to know that like the mountain streams, his people knew "deep quietness" and strength like that of "granite." James Nicholson is absolutely correct when he says of Leonard Tate, "He was a very private individual—a mountain thrush who did his singing from a hidden place." An apt image for Tate, the thrush, for it reminds us that above all else this Grundy County singer was a gentle man and a gentle poet.

*All the Lost Octobers and Other Poems;* all subsequent poems are also found in this collection. Only page numbers will be cited parenthetically.

**Works Consulted**


---. Personal Letters.


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Leonard Tate: The Gentle Poet From Grundy County

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Cooling my face against unfevered stone return,
O heart of mine, unto our own! (18)

That return to the mountain and its comforting assurance renewed him daily. He understood the misperceptions of mountain people that brought mockery and pity, but he also knew the depth of hearts in tune with the natural and real world. He heard the music and knew the peace of his environment. And he wanted so much to let others hear that music and share that peace, if only through his verbal depictions. As he explained in "Mountain People," he knew those on the mountain were often described as "boorish," "hard-bitten," "coarse," "shallow and brawling." But he wanted readers to know that like the mountain streams, his people knew "deep quietness" and strength like that of "granite." James Nicholson is absolutely correct when he says of Leonard Tate, "He was a very private individual—a mountain thrush who did his singing from a hidden place." An apt image for Tate, the thrush, for it reminds us that above all else this Grundy County singer was a gentle man and a gentle poet.

*All the Lost Octobers and Other Poems*; all subsequent poems are also found in this collection. Only page numbers will be cited parenthetically.

**Works Consulted**


---. Personal Letters.

