

The poetry of Edna Meudt is a

Song from the Southwest

BY GEORGE VUKELICH
PHOTOGRAPHS BY MARY ALLEN

Edna Meudt lives on a farm in southwestern Wisconsin, a mile south of Dodgeville. She no longer works the land herself, so she leases out acreage to adjoining neighbors. Thus, on the sun-filled morning we visited, the place seemed almost abandoned and eerily quiet. No animals stood in the pasture as we drove in. No lowing came from the barn. Only half a dozen huge brownish cats, sitting motionless in a row on the porch, watched us approach and never moved a hair.

Inside, we sat in the book-lined living room, the "workshop" in which Edna writes, and looked out across the fields. Her roots go deep in this southwestern Wisconsin soil.

I hadn't seen her for several months, so we just chatted for a while. Sunlight was falling on her, turning her white hair nearly gold. I told her how good she looked. In the years I've known her, she always has.

"You know," Edna said, "Professor Robert Gard has decided there should be an 'image' for me. He wants me to be a 'regionalist' and an 'earth mother' type, and to write about lovely things. But I really do write some horrendous things. Someday I'm going to get those shockers together and drop a bombshell on the few people who read me."

Edna Meudt has been a farm wife for almost fifty years now, and she has raised five children. Farm life has never been an easy life; the burdens leave their mark. Her body is heavier. Her step is slower. Her hands are honed like hickory. But Edna Meudt does not fit the stock image of a Wisconsin farm wife, for she



"Writing poetry is marvelous therapy. And it's so much cheaper than going to a psychoanalyst. When you write poetry, you find out what you are thinking and what you really feel about things. When you start putting it down on paper, you find out some pretty strange things about yourself."

has written and published four volumes of poetry, and that makes all the difference.

It is her face and eyes that surprise you. Edna laughs easily, and her eyes are penetrating and bright. You can tell that a young spirit still resides inside. You sense, before she tells you, that she has known a great love, a shattering love, and that its afterglow lingers yet and keeps her young.

She is as talented as any poet in the state, and probably one of the most honest. Not every person would admit to being sixty-five years old without batting an eye. Not every person would recall an unmarried daughter's pregnancy with such complete candor. "We had a long discussion about it," she said. "My daughter and I decided we were not going to do it in the 'typical' American way—for her to take a trip to see 'an aunt' in some distant city. We decided we would welcome

this child into our home and be very proud of him. It was a difficult time because my daughter needed much support and bolstering. So many of the things that I felt I couldn't say to her then eventually found their way into the trilogy of poems that was called 'Young and Fair Is Christopher.'"

"Christopher" has been reprinted seventeen times, and Edna regards it as one of the milestones in her life. "When it first appeared," she remembered, "August Derleth called me on the phone and said how much he liked it, particularly the *honesty* of it. I liked myself much better as a writer of poetry, and from then on I've tried to be very honest in every poem I've written."

Edna was born and grew up on a farm in the Wyoming Valley near Spring Green, practically in the shadow of Frank Lloyd Wright's Taliesin. Her parents were immigrants—her father from Czechoslovakia, her

mother from Denmark. She attended Madison's Edgewood High School and graduated in 1924. She married Peter Meudt, who died recently, the same year.

I asked when she had realized she was a poet. She laughed and said, "I haven't realized it yet. Robert Frost said that 'poet' is a praise word. He felt that you should let someone else call you a poet. I do not call myself a poet." She laughed again. "Actually, I never gave any thought to being a poet. I *did* think that I wanted to write fiction, though, but there wasn't ever any time. You know, dairy farm, children. . . . There wasn't any time until 1944." Her brown eyes closed, remembering.

"We already had lost one son, and the other son was serving with Task Force Fifty-eight in the Pacific. As far as news was concerned, the fleet just dropped from sight. It was considered lost. Out of this terrible need to communicate, I wrote "Letter to My Other Son," a letter directed to our dead son. Later, when our son and the fleet emerged alive, I realized that my words had something to say to other people. I published the poem and that, too, was a kind of milestone."

I knew that August Derleth had published many of Edna's poems, so I had just naturally assumed that he had influenced her style. She very gently, but firmly, corrected me. "Of course, August helped me a great deal when he started to publish my things, but by then I had more or less found my style." She paused. "Did you ever hear of Lee Douglas?" I said that I hadn't. "Well," she continued, "that's who influenced my style."

She related how she had been at a meeting of the Wisconsin Fellowship of Poets when a blizzard stranded her in the old bus station in Madison. Having coffee next to her in Hill's Coffee Shop was a man wearing a sailor's cap and a peacoat. They struck up a conversation. He turned out to be a remarkable man who had played with the Minneapolis Symphony, had worked with the government during World War II planning and laying out airfields, was a scientist, and had an interest in the arts. His name was Lee Douglas.

"Up until then," Edna recalled, "I had written mostly rhymed things. Lee Douglas got me started on writing free verse. We corresponded for several years. He had a tremendous influence on me. He took many of my poems and recast them into free verse. He was a genius. He wrote beautiful things himself, but he had little interest in publishing them. He is living now at Wood Veteran's Hospital."

Edna learned her lessons so well that she is now one of the best poetry teachers around. She's a fixture at the Rhinelander School of the Arts, a true professional who knows her craft inside and out. And in association with Reid Gilbert, she also teaches at the Valley Studio Workshop near Spring Green. She sees her teaching role as that of a catalyst, sharing what she calls "a journey toward poetry" with her pupils. She tells them what she knows, and she picks up what they know. "We help each other," she said. "I always feel after Rhinelander, or any workshop I'm teaching, that I've gained more than I've given. And when that isn't true, I don't want to be teaching any more."

As a teacher, she is a far cry from the little old lady in tennis shoes. She related with some relish her en-



Beneath a portrait of her mother, Edna Meudt remembers: "My mother was Calvinist and Lutheran. My father was Roman Catholic. When they had their second child—me—they decided that my brother would be raised Catholic and I would be raised Lutheran. When I was five, my father was badly hurt. My mother became a convert to Catholicism then, and I was raised Catholic. But if you want to know the truth, I have been agnostic since I was a child."

counter with a well-known Wisconsin writer at last year's Rhinelander workshop. "I don't like four-letter words in poetry," she explained. "I think they're a waste of the reader's time and simply show a poverty of mind. But August Derleth used to send me many poetry books after he reviewed them. I received from August perhaps six hundred volumes over the years—Ginsberg and all of them. I read them and used them in my classes, so I knew what was going on in the outside world. Well, last summer at Rhinelander, I was in an informal group talking when I was called away. When I returned, this writer said, 'Oh, you won't want to come back now because we're talking about things you won't want to hear.' And I said, 'Listen, I probably have the best collection of pornographic poetry in the state.' God bless August! He certainly educated me, because among the books he sent are collected works from Hart Crane to Theodore Roethke — along with the pornographic stuff. Granted, I don't think much of it. But I said to that young man, 'Don't try to shock me because it can't be done.'"

Edna has never had a formal writing course herself. She says if she hadn't read Edward Arlington Robinson's "Man Against the Sky," she never would have thought of writing poetry. "But when I read that, I said to myself, 'This is what a poem is supposed to do and say.' I think I was twenty-three when I first encountered him. It was 1928 or 1929, the year he received his third Pulitzer prize."

Yet Edna isn't sure the world really needs poetry. "The *poets* think people need it," she said with a smile, "but one of my biggest gripes is that people who think they want to write poetry *do not read poetry*. They have no idea of what's being written today. There's a moral in there somewhere."

I asked her how she writes a poem. "Well," she said, "I don't write poetry every day." I told her Robert Frost didn't either. "That comforts me," she said. "Well, I don't know what to say. Of course, I rough it out. I'm one who likes my human comforts. I have my green chair and I sit down with a yellow legal-length pad and I write out the poem in longhand. I don't think I have ever sat at a typewriter and typed a first draft." After the poem is written in longhand, she types it out, letting the lines fall in free-verse form. Her completed poems usually end up about half as long as they were in the first draft. "That's the hardest part to get across to beginning writers," she explained. "Almost half the poem *should be expendable*. It's a difficult lesson to learn. And not everybody learns it."

Edna hasn't kept track of how many poems she has published. Most of them appear in her four books, *Round River Canticle*, *In No Strange Land*, *No One Sings Face Down*, and *The Ineluctable Sea*. "How many I've written," she added, "is another thing. I have a box full of rejects—a literary rag bag, some terrible sonnets. I look at them and cringe, but something moved me at one time to say these things, so I keep them all."

I asked this amazing woman if poetry was therapy or perhaps an escape for her. "An escape?" She reflected. "No. I think it's probably a religion with me. Because what is religion — spirituality — except those

deep, almost *unsayable* things that you *feel*? Somehow, in the writing of poetry, you can spell them out."

She paused. "I think love more than anything else makes a poet out of a person. You know, August used to say, 'Out of fulfillment you don't write your best. It's renunciation that really grinds it out of you.'"

That love, that loss, constitutes much of Edna Meudt's poetry and makes her one of the most outstanding midwestern poets of our time, as the title poem from her latest book amply demonstrates.

The Ineluctable Sea

Parting is all we know of heaven and all we need of hell.
—Emily Dickinson

... Leavetakings ...

We from the womb expelled
to the last expelled breath
journey from expectation to
fulfillment to farewells;
from tooth fairy to aphrodisiac
to grand finale or final neglect.
Shakespeare explicated our acts
as seven, Emily said it best
in thirteen words.

When I set sail if there is one
who loves me still—know:
What you saw was a fractional being
from whom amenities sloughed,
to whom barnacles clung.
Never young I always had
what was last forgotten.
Too much of me submerged
with cargo of involvement.
Lacking the light stroke
I shunned neither dolphin nor shark,
seldom served company with private hurt
—apathy the only expendable ballast;
love a sometimes mooring star,
hate was never anchor.

When I sail, elliptic spirit
in flight, set the law aside:
Do not scuttle my hull but build
like the Sioux a scaffold atop
the hill's cowl. Though I be waste
and pollutant, cut communication line,
silenced subversive of rigid concepts
of Truth and Beauty and Peace, I would rest
in skeletal rigging as roost for swallows.

Where a rock crevice guards the caverned
secrets of fossil and underground passage,
beach me then above fields enriched by Indian,
slave, and beast. Bones a universal white,
speak our brotherhood at last!
Ineluctable Sea, mean the end of leavetaking!