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Edna Meudt's Long Path Home

A Wisconsin farm wife, mother, grandmother, died the other week at the age of 82, and a lot of folks who know about these things will tell you that this farm woman was also the very best poet in the whole state and had been for years and years.

Edna Meudt had been a farm wife outside of Dodgeville for over 50 years, raised five children there and, along with her friend and compatriot August Derleth, became a seminal force in Wisconsin letters.

Greg Brown sings a song about his grandma "putting the summers all in jars," and it reminds me of Edna, who not only did that, she put it all down in her yellow legal pads as well.

Like Augie Derleth, Edna had Wisconsin "in her bones." She was born and grew up in the Wyoming Valley near Spring Green. Her parents were immigrants—her father from Czechoslovakia, her mother from Denmark. She attended Edgewood High School in Madison, graduating in 1924. That same year she married Peter Meudt and lived with him until his death almost 20 years ago.

"My mother was Calvinist and Lutheran," she told me in a 1972 interview for Wisconsin Trails. "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 5, 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."

She never gave any thought to being a poet at all, although she did want to write fiction. But there was no time. The dairy farm and the children took it all. There wasn't any time until 1944. World War II.

"We had already lost one son," she recalled, "and the other was serving with Task Force 58 in the Pacific. As far as the 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." 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 kind of a milestone.

Other publication milestones followed: Poetry Magazine of Chicago, the Beloit Poetry Journal, five books, two plays and her autobiography *The Rose Jar*, completed shortly before her death and scheduled for publication later this year.

"Writing poetry," Edna Meudt said, "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."

She didn't write poetry every day, but when she did, she sat in her green chair—"I'm one who likes my human

comforts"—with a yellow legal pad, writing the poem out in longhand. She didn't recall ever typing out a first draft. After the poem was written in longhand, then she typed it out, letting the lines fall into free-verse form. Next she edited, cut, deleted—her finished



poems usually ended up half as long as they were in first draft.

"That's the hardest part to get across to beginning writers," she said. "Almost half the poem should be expendable. It's a difficult lesson to learn, and not everybody learns it."

Old Pro that he was, August Derleth would have been particularly proud of her disciplined writing in these 20 lines she wrote for him after his death. Augie had called his home "Place of Hawks." She called her poem "Return to Place of Hawks."

We came to your present place, concrete under sod and marble bench, crossed the road and nature plot to the stone house deep in oaks.

Your mother welcomed us, pretty pink as wild rose. Reminiscence held in shadows against stairwell and ceiling. We spoke of guests along those years:

Early Mr. Wright had come—"Derleth, you've built yourself a barn" he said and heard "Why not, Frank? A bull will be living in it."

But we know you had a man's most gentle ways—how the big hands could touch a friend, on typewriter keys loosen music to turn words dimensional as the pine knotted walls where bone weary, undefeated you

sensed your time.

Then in the kitchen for tea your mother waited as we drank silence of her house peopled with books and a permanence of you. We saw over phlox and fern the cemetery, through open windows caught the high "Come here! Come here!" of a tyrannus kingbird Waiting for the whine of death to make him whole.

Sometimes farm wife. Sometimes mother. Sometimes grandmother. Always poet. Edna Meudt. Memento Mori.

Sensing evening's intangibles in his own shadow the child runs to me.

We go—the boy, the cow and I— A long path home. ■