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## An Emerging Tradition: The Montana First Book Awards

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## AN EMERGING TRADITION

*A review of the Montana First Book Awards*

In 1977, after extensive, but generalized research into the needs of the regional literary community, the Western States Arts Foundation developed a survey questionnaire designed to uncover more specific and individually relevant needs. The questionnaire was sent to writers, small presses, little magazines, and the arts agencies in the ten western states. Results were, in some cases, expected: writers cited a need for increased publishing, reading and residency opportunities, as well as increased fellowships and reviews of their work. Presses and magazines cited the need for better marketing and distribution systems, in addition to more substantial funding.

In other cases, the results were less expected, and consequently more revealing. For instance, as Pat Simmons, program director for the Montana Arts Council, reported in a memo to council members: "While state arts agencies are all doing something in the area of literature, it is pitifully small, constituting an average of 3.5% of their programmatic budgets." In addition, nearly three-quarters of that 3.5% were committed to Artist in the Schools programs. In Montana, the share of literature funding devoted to the Poets in the Schools program amounted to 96%. Other programs and needs were virtually ignored.

Discouraging as the figures are, the years following 1977 have produced decidedly good news. Foremost among the actions taken in response to the survey was Montana's First Book Award competition, which was proposed to the Arts Council by Pat Simmons early in the fall of 1978. Subsequently approved and funded, the competition began in 1979. June 1 was designated as the deadline for submission of manuscripts, and a policy of selecting known Montana writers, or writers with Montana "connections," as judges was established.

To date, five books have been published as a result of the First Book Award competition, including two manuscripts selected in 1979. The most recent selection, *Small Mercies*, by Elizabeth Weber, is due from Owl Creek Press, with luck, before Christmas.

By all accounts, the future of the First Book Award is bright. In addition, the Arts Council has in the works a proposal designed to better promote and distribute the work of regional writers. The mail-order project will have as its home the Yellowstone Arts Center in Billings. It is hoped this project will serve as a model for other states in their promotional and distribution efforts.

To further brighten Montana's literary prospects, the Arts Council has approved the establishment of fellowships for writers, contingent upon funding from the National Endowment for the Arts, for the near but not immediate future. With the solidly emerging tradition of the First Book Award as a base for their efforts, the Arts Council has gone a long way towards making up for past neglect, which is good news not only for Montana writers, but also for readers in any locale interested in literature of quality.

1979: *Blind Horses* by Ed Lahey

Judge: James Welch, Rick DeMarinis

Arcraft Printers, Butte, Montana: 1979

“Instead of I like it  
someone said  
the Chamber of Commerce slogan  
should have read  
‘Butte is my town,  
let’s face it’  
which I couldn’t.”

(Letter to the Editor)

Certain poems need to be written. They spring from characters, places and moments the poet can’t forget, however distant the experience. For Ed Lahey, Butte is one of those places, where characters, events, and a way of life are dying for a voice, for someone who can discover that voice and make it heard. Much had been written about Butte, its glory days as the richest hole on earth, its celebrity status in the early days of American labor, its undeniable uniqueness among Montana towns. But I’d be willing to bet that very little of what’s been written evokes the feel and sense of the Butte Ed Lahey knows, the Butte of working-class miners, welders and wives, and the lives they’ve lived in the long shadow of sacrifice and tragedy. Much of the book’s tone is elegaic. Still more is urgent, full of hard, single-syllable words and driving rhythms, the diction and cadence of natural voices struggling towards eloquence.

Lahey’s primary concern is the fleshing out of the Butte, and in many ways the Montana, too many people *think* they know. His first poem addresses the relationship between men and the ground they work. The mine itself is the main character:

“Deep in mined-out waste  
carbide lamps illuminate mold  
black damp in a caved-in raise.  
Shattered quartzite seams  
crack inside the mountain  
where quick men move  
(in calculated haste) . . .”

(The Orphan Girl Prospect)

Later, Lahey expands on the opposition of men and earth:

“Underground we fought the earth together.  
For the hell of it, and Peacock copper.”

(Contract Miners)

“The Kelly Men worked  
in the open stope,  
barred down rock

from a bald head raise  
to the gopher crews  
who mucked around  
the goddam clock.

The coughed up soot  
but silica stuck,  
as widow-makers howled  
when the Ingersoll moaned  
and the starter steel struck  
the hornblende stone."

(Contributor's Note)

The best the miners can hope for is an uneasy stand-off, and perhaps enough warning of impending danger to get out of the way. Unfortunately, the terms of the mountain are less generous. Out of nowhere, the machinery can remove a hand, or the tunnel you're working can collapse on itself:

"The nightmare of caved-in timber  
broken head board, a stull,  
cracked like a tooth  
in a stone fist, 3600 feet  
below the surface . . ."

(Touch Laughter)

Those who lived that life, lived with the constant threat, were changed. Some were never healthy again, or whole. Some had a hard time finding anything concrete they could trust. As a result, the lives Lahey gives us are often filled with rage, violence, and regret: rage and regret that through memory we can only hope to preserve something that is already lost; violence that erupts as suddenly among men as it does from the mountain and the mine.

Some of Lahey's characters become threats to themselves, like the nameless man in "The Fell of Dark" who, in a classic fit of lunatic rage, tries to stand his ground against the dark, the mountain and the snow, shakes his fist and is struck down. The speaker of the poem makes clear that whatever killed the man came from inside, "From the timber of his rage." But it's no secret what drove him to the point of self-annihilation.

Other characters become threats to each other. In "Stone Before the Crumpled Horn," Indigo, the Mexican, and McGuire, the Irishman, face off one night in the East Park Plaza bar — Indigo wielding a stropped razor, McGuire the jagged neck of a bottle — for no other reason than they're both ready to explode. In "A Different Price," the threat is less obvious and dramatic, but just as deadly. After Haggarty loses his hand to a bull gear, the company reinstates him to the position of hoister, responsible for the pulley-driven elevators that carry men in and out of the mine:

"Last week his ghost hand  
missed a grip  
dropped six men  
a thousand feet."

These are the terms of Lahey's Butte, hard and unalterable. Some men walk away:

“leave the worked out stopes,  
trudge back to safer jobs,  
collect a union wage.”

(The Orphan Girl Prospect)

Those who stay — “other fools, maybe wise,” who “laugh and wait” — are never the same. Nor are their families or friends. The man struck down by the mountain and himself in “The Fell of Dark” leaves a woman behind:

“Left in the cabin alone,  
his woman said to the wind,  
'He took all of the risks.'  
And the cold night whispered  
and poked at her chimney  
with fingers sharp as a thief's.”

How then do people live these lives and survive? Lahey reveals one possibility in “Contributor's Note,” the book's final poem:

“I burned images black  
on the hanging wall  
with a spitter's lamp,  
drank brackish water  
from a tin can cup  
and grew hands hard  
with knotted knuckles . . .

Lost in a drift of teeth  
I dreamed a lot.”

The speaker of “My Three-Act Dream” imagines “his green-eyed girl with the apple breasts,” who “shakes out stars like laundered linen . . . She rubs the ache . . . lifts me from the wings of pitch black stopes, up raises of the night and free of the working earth.”

The men dream and imagine a life that will be worth its risks. Women imagine, in “The Cloud Chaser,” a man who will bring them news from the sky, “a taste of the rain,” rather than grime and soot from the mine. Still, it is only through female characters that Lahey suggests the men can be saved. Two poems directly address this possibility. In “Tough Laughter,” a wife searches a caved-in mine for her lost husband. She finds him too late. However, in “Stone Before The Crumpled Horn,” the “Spanish girl with no pants,” who “danced like black gunpowder in a dream,” diffuses the explosion between Indigo and McGuire, the two men who faced off in the East Park Plaza bar.

Hard as the terms of this life are, Lahey's characters find moments of hope and celebration. They learn to live with this legacy of menace and loss. In doing so, they introduce themes that reappear in individual guises throughout the First Book series, themes that are Montanan in origin and influence, but are not limited by their locale.

What emerges from *Blind Horses* is a voice Butte can hang onto, a voice that is honest, revealing and committed.

Which is not to say that *Blind Horses* is flawless. Those poems with predominantly aesthetic or metaphorical concerns are the least successful: "Dialogue of Poet and Painter," "Poete Maudit," "The Wound in the Heel." Also, of the six books in the series, *Blind Horses* certainly has the least flattering cover, and many more typographical errors than should have gone unnoticed. Nevertheless, despite or because of its rough edges, the book succeeds where it matters most, in the honest rendering of a town and a way of life the rest of the world either condescends to, or ignores. At his best, Lahey speaks in the clear, experienced voice of a man who's survived his past, who's found ways to live in a dangerous world, whose poems emerge from an urgent need to be heard.

1979: *The Taxidermist's Daughter* by Nancy Schoenberger

Judges: James Welch, Rick DeMarinis

Calliopea Press, Missoula: 1980

"When I have no more complaints  
I'll follow the example  
of this yellow leaf moth  
practicing invisibility  
on the flowered curtain.  
She is sure, solitary,  
utterly still, not unlike  
that cockroach barely breathing  
beneath withering morning glories,  
his unwholesome back glinting  
in porch light.

Another August night I pause  
outside the bug-riddled circle  
of human light, watching Uncle Benny  
share a beer with father. They talk  
over hard times, shake heads over  
the factory's mysterious fire."

(Another August Night in 1958)

From the outset of *The Taxidermist's Daughter*, the second selection in 1979, from the opening lines of "Move On," the first of its nineteen poems, you can sense a restlessness in the voice, an impatience, on the part of the speaker, with the world's and her own imperfections. In "Move On," a woman remembers her brother, at seventeen, as one of those who don't age. She sees the open garage, brightly lit, and "tools laid out on asphalt, the gaping hood." She remembers how the garage door opened, how her brother stepped through, and "All else ages." From this moment on, things are changed:

"In dreams  
her brother talks

with his hands.  
He wants  
  
to be held. He tries  
but cannot step out  
of the car,  
  
of the April  
night, as all else  
ages and moves on."

Her brother is left behind and she only watches, as if he had fallen from a raft and struggled ashore, and she can only keep floating, helpless to retrieve him. Schoenberger's focus here is tight. Her interest is not the big picture, but these subtle, telling details, the moment she remembers her brother drifting away.

As a result, certain points of information are withheld. It is not clear from the poem, for example, how this distance manifested itself later on, if the separation was indeed unalterable. Nor is it clear how much of the poem's realization is hindsight. What's important is that Schoenberger places this observation of change and loss in a voice that is old enough to apprehend the circumstance, but young enough not to recognize it, a voice that holds out for the way things are supposed to be.

To a large degree, this is the voice that dominates "Beasts and Children," the first of the book's three sections, a voice that embraces dream and magic, a young girl who longs to be more perfect and pleasing than she is. In "Another August Night in 1958," she envies a "yellow leaf moth," because it is "sure, solitary, utterly still," much like the animals in her father's loft in "The Taxidermist's Daughter." Standing off the porch, "outside the bug-riddled circle of human light," watching her father and uncle talk, the daughter senses something alive in the world that she can't see for all the darkness:

"Then I know the night  
is not ours — the cicada  
whirring maniacally  
in the mimosa,  
the creepers  
lifting moonward  
their astonished faces."

She can hear even the slightest sound: "the beanstalk rumbles in its socket." The world is poised, then nothing happens. She remains certain of what she felt, but she knows she won't be able to tell anyone what she's discovered: "Soon I'll come bursting in, claim the paternal knee, hands filled with useless magic."

Schoenberger reveals similar feelings in the title poem, "The Taxidermist's Daughter." As a girl, the poem's speaker watched her father immersed in his work, the animals that gathered "in the pine loft above the house . . . asking for new life." Her father was a kind of magician, a man who could make the squirrel "fly again in the showcase." She wanted to help, to be part of the magic, the "new life:"

"All those years I wanted to say  
*choose me* as you bent down  
to put the last touch  
to the beautiful wood duck."

In the first section, the speaker longs for an engagement with the world that she can't have. Credit Schoenberger's skill as a poet for addressing this not-unheard-of situation with assurance and conviction. All the while she dreams and imagines a less troubled existence, the speaker is beginning to realize its impossibility. She's seen enough flaws in herself and others, in the way the world works, that by the end of the section innocence has been lost, and you realize the change was happening all along: in "Near Philly," which begins, "Recall the fallen days"; in "The Beast's Palace," which begins, "Always beside the bedstead on the porcelain table: the red rose which was my undoing"; and most stunningly in "The Taxidermist's Daughter," where Schoenberger writes, "Nights the gray squirrel rattles the roof, rubs the glass where his stuffed mate swoons in the final leap." This is the image that comes closest to defining the moment innocence was lost, the stark juxtaposition of real life and its artifice, the moment when the speaker nearly realizes what it is that keeps her father so distant, why he's unable to let her in.

The second section, called "Widow," opens with the poem, "This is Missoula," and the lines, "The world is nearly itself when the black trees hug the snow." These lines introduce six poems that concern themselves with the aftermath of innocence and magic lost, and the ways in which people learn to live without childhood escapes. The constant, shifting distance she sees between herself and others, once regarded as imperfection, is now a fact. Experience and reflection have made that clear, just as they made clear the fancifulness of her dreams. But experience and reflection have yet to offer any compensation. There's no longer any doubt that something's missing, only doubt as to how to fill the absence. The speaker of "The New Wife" can't believe how differently she's treated now that the big event, the wedding, is over. She's beginning already to feel the signs of age. She has nightmares of a life resigned to making everyone else happy. And there seems to be no one there to ease this rude transition in adulthood, where she no longer even hopes to be special, no escape from her new life.

"Widow" tells, chronologically, the other end of the story. Its speaker addresses her widowhood in terms of loyalty. So much of her life happened before she met her husband, and certainly the rest will happen without him. How much, then, does she owe to his memory? Not an easy question. Whatever her answer, she recognizes the need to be loyal to her own memory, and to her own life:

"I'm in my black dress, the gloves  
to the wrist, the dark orchid  
at my throat, as if otherwise  
it would break. I've left

one life and entered another  
in the wrong hour . . ."

Schoenberger examines the choices these women have, whether it be disbelief, denial, understanding or acceptance. She reveals, beneath the individual lives, a common strain of dissatisfaction with how circumstances have worked out, uncovering a hardness that is seen as both necessary and regrettable:

"Somewhere azaleas burn on  
in ignorance, as when  
she held me on the chaise lounge."



Losses that might once have become exaggerations are seen in a sober, down to earth light:

“. . . So I have  
given you up. It is September. Soon  
the world goes underground,  
deep in her white hood.”

Where do you go from here? The third section, entitled “Musselshell Woman,” begins on a note of assurance: “These streets are as blue as shale, as a heron’s wing.” Credit again Schoenberger’s skill as a poet for revealing, in a simple, two-fold comparison, the changes the voice has undergone, how the speaker is now able to see blue in both shale and heron’s wing and not worry that one needs to be more blue or beautiful. Connections, between sky and earth at least, are beginning to emerge from the fragmented world in section two. This emergence is most directly stated in “Cedar”:

“. . . Now  
that rain is my neighbor, I want  
to unfold down the slow  
comfortable path.  
The bud at the base of my brain  
begins to open.”

Much of the third section is spent reassembling broken pieces. “From the Tree,” a childhood poem distinctly different from those in the first section, contains none of the restlessness of the earlier poems, or the nagging awareness that something is missing. Whatever it was is still missing. Experience and reflection have only clarified the absence.

The two poems that follow “From the Tree” finally ask the question that’s been lurking behind Schoenberger’s sense of accumulated distance and loss. Once you lose your faith, your ability to trust, how do you resurrect it? Where do you turn? “At Boar’s Head” ends with these lines:

“The screen door closes  
on mother ironing. At Boar’s Head  
the ocean is patient  
and guiltless. Already  
evening closes its doors, the sea in her dark  
origin.”

“Near Painted Rock” pushes the closures and negations one step further:

“The river’s a mirror. Look past  
your yard, the road stares you down.  
You’re empty-handed now.  
No lake, no dream, no home.  
The sky shuts down.”

Many poets would have ended things there, one last slam of the door just to let you know any signs of optimism are not to be trusted. Nancy Schoenberger, however, includes two more poems that radically alter the book’s direction.

"Musselshell Woman" is the story of a daughter who followed her father west until they finally arrived in Montana: "*We came to the Musselshell emptyhanded: three children, two horses,*" which, oddly enough, is the same situation we found in "Near Painted Rock": *emptyhanded*. What makes the difference is the last stanza. After surviving the rest of her years on the "leached white" ground, the Musselshell Woman's story ends like this:

    ". . . Nights  
    her children rise from the axe's work  
    in the moon's blue smoke. On the wide elbow  
    of the Musselshell they dance. That woman, one  
    with moon and wind, beyond all human ways  
    won back her life."

Reading Schoenberger's last poem, "In Earth's New Dark," the strategy of the three sections becomes clear. From the fallen days of "Near Philly" and "The Taxidermist's Daughter," to the fragmentation and chaos of emotions in "Widow" and "The New Wife," to the triumph of endurance in "Musselshell Woman," Schoenberger has traced a classic path in the growth of awareness, from innocence to loss of faith to the assertion of will. In doing so, she's also explored the role of the imagination in daily life, from childhood source of pure escape and wishfulness to a way of sustaining beauty and optimism within the process of loss that age becomes. The personal celebration of "In Earth's New Dark" is well-deserved:

    "Alone these days, as though I were  
    male, beast, or child  
    I mark these changes: how the seed  
    in her furred home nudges  
    soil, her green  
    unscarred and gleaming;  
    how pale wheat gives up and utters  
    *take us*, as though I'd come  
    to lie in earth's new dark  
    rejoicing, with any lover."

1980: *Janus Peeking* by Craig Churry  
    Judges: William Kittredge, Naomi Lazard  
    Calliopea Press, Santa Rosa, California: 1981

Craig Churry begins his chapbook-length poem, *Janus Peeking*, with these lines:

    "Even more than the time in the kitchen  
    I need to say this to you.  
  
    I need to grab you by the shirt  
    In the eyes, straight in the face  
    Tell you how the flashlight filled with dirt,  
    Tossed into the bushes has just seen the dead."

Two pages later he writes:

“If you do not know this land of sleep  
Stark and frozen come with me  
Inside the whale breast, coyote bone,  
White ring in the tree trunk.  
There are craters of the moon I leave behind;  
Craters I take with me when I wake.”

As both of these passages suggest, *Janus Peeking* is, among other things, about writing, about the imagination and why this unconventional book-length poem was written: an announcement or an invocation. Which is appropriate, considering that in relation to the other books in the series, *Janus Peeking* conforms least to the expected treatments of form and theme. Add to that a list of concerns that includes the uses of language, experience, memory and invention, all explicit concerns of poetry, and you might begin to think no good can come of all this writing about writing. In most cases, such suspicions would be well-founded. However, in *Janus Peeking*, Churry avoids the problems of audience and accessibility by establishing a firm base for the poem in convincing experience, in memories and emotions he cares about, giving readers the common ground they need, a context in which to understand the issues and the ideas. From this base, Churry can indulge the voice he's chosen, a point of view that allows him the freedom to roam, to be unpredictable, to adjust his stance and perspective. Janus, a Latin solar deity, presided over the beginnings and the ends of everything. He had two faces, one for the rising sun, one for sunset.

In *Janus Peeking*, Churry is doing just that, peeking. He's showing the reader glimpses of the world available to someone with near-omniscience. Certain passages show the poet focusing in on the fine details of his world, a world full of lives and circumstances in transition:

“It was a house stitched together  
From the insides  
With tendrils of spidery fern  
And ivy,  
  
A wick shook clean from the fiery  
Iris beneath its ribcage,  
Two threadbare cats  
Weaving insane the red-green light.”

Later in the poem he writes:

“We built a house out of barrels,  
Draped the bent window  
With mice and the flathandle  
Backs of scoops for the furnace,  
  
Slabbed a thin coat of peeling  
Rust above the door . . .”

Other passages show the poet stepping to assess his situation, achieving distance and perspective:

“When you live among both worlds  
You must be careful how hungry  
You speak with your fingers.”

The idea of circumstances in transition is a central concern of *Janus Peeking*. As the brief explanation reads on the outside, back cover, Janus “is commonly represented with two heads because every door looks two ways.” Thematically, several pairs of ideas are seen in transition throughout the book, very near their points of inversion. The distinction between dream and reality is frequently blurred, which allows for many intriguing, often arresting images:

“We spoke a dead language  
When we arrived,  
Poured our lungs into tin pails  
And tossed what breath was saved  
Back to the sea . . .

Our names were shaved  
Into pure white robes.  
Our tremendous wings grew inward  
Like the two end tines  
Of a fluttering pitchfork.”

Memory and invention react similarly to each other. Certain passages have both the appearance and sound of recalled experience: “Remember as boys we would play all day Captain Commandos with straw in our socks?” Other passages present memory and invention as indistinguishable:

“What I had not seen as a face  
In the fountain Rond de Chaines  
Was not my uncle from the Netherlands  
No one’s heard from in six years . . .

It was not the pigeon under the eaves  
Heaving balloons.”

Perhaps the most significant pair of ideas Churry examines near their point of inversion is language and experience, as they alternate in determining image, rhythm and sound. Early in the book, Churry writes:

“We carry our lives  
off the farm, slung over  
our shoulders in empty feed sacks

Far into night sleep  
Gathers its wooden spoons.”

Though it’s not an expected, or usual image, “sleep gathers its wooden spoons” emerges from the almost narrative tone of the first three lines, which are certainly rooted in experience, real or imagined. The rhythm of the lines is unhurried. The language demands no special attention. Experience is the key, the main concern.

Other lines and passages shift the balance of concern to language, and the primary determinant of image, rhythm, and sound is this: that the line sounds good, or that it strives for a desired mood or effect: "Old rabbits leap the icy man-pot!", or:

"All they had to do  
Was smell my breath

When I told them that  
The difference between  
The blue and all the  
Blue I could hold in my  
Arms was the size

of my stomach  
A garden hose the inner  
Lining that was tied

In a knot

Early in the book, Churry captures the range of image his voice contains. He shows us, in the progression of three images, the transformation of image from one determined by language and internal concerns, to one in which language and experience play equal roles, to an image determined primarily by experience, where the language serves the accessibility of the image:

"Letting myself go  
I have forgotten something,  
Out there

Something that resembles  
A teeth handkerchief .

Something that reminds me  
The flesh around barbed wire  
Is onion . . .

There is something else:

How the flies carry on  
When I leave the room."

Unlike the other books in the series, *Janus Peeking* is not organized as a collection of individual poems (or poems and fictions). This is Churry's most conspicuous application of the idea of circumstances in transition, in the form of the book itself. There are no page numbers, no table of contents. However, the poem seems to fall easily into thematic sections, most often determined by the point of view, most often distinguished by natural pauses between pages. Also, in the last half of the book, several thematic sections are named that stand well on their own, and have been published separately: "wild rice," "uncovering the mine shaft," "my cousin who dies quick in the night," "biting the pomme de terre," "home for lunch."

The unspoken question in the form of *Janus Peeking* is one of conclusions: do all the images, themes and disparate parts add up to the single long poem this book claims to be? Yes and no. If you mean does the book conform to the expected, traditional, no loose ends standards: no. However, if you mean is the work ultimately determined by certain images and themes organic to the poem, is it successful in exploring what appears to be its overall scheme: yes.

We should also consider that Churry's apparent concern, in *Janus Peeking*, was not a poem as finished, polished artifact, but a work that addresses the process through which we arrive at poetry, how we give shape to the blurred and ambiguous areas of experience that defy easy categorization, easy expression. Memory, after all, is frequently altered by time and invention. Dreams and reality don't always stay where they belong.

In the end, Churry's voice and imagination hold the book together, his constant connections of idea and detail just to let you know he hasn't left the rest of us behind:

"It is raining on both  
Sides of the house now.  
By noon the birds will have  
Bitten through the dark  
Underwing of the staircase,  
And an odor like mutton  
From the trees buffeting  
The hallway. We have carefully  
Selected our places under  
The table, armed with salt  
For the wound and toothpick.  
The noon whistle a swallow,  
A feather screaming from the toaster."

1981: *A Radiant Map of the World* by Rick Newby  
Judges: A. B. Guthrie Jr., William Pitt Root  
Arrow Graphics, Missoula: 1981

"To babble, to break into a curse,  
there is such cruelty in the crazed tongue.  
\*  
Snake in a cool jar, my tongue coils  
and strikes at random. Great birds fall,  
angels clutch their throats, and midgets  
search for their eyes on the forest floor.  
\*  
My tongue is a weapon, a tool, a gift."

So begins *A Radiant Map of the World*, Rick Newby's collection of sixteen poems and fictions that distinguishes itself, in terms of form and theme, as the most ambitious book in the series. We are given traditionally crafted poems — lyric, narrative, elegy — poems that verge on prose, and brief, not so traditional fictions that verge on poetry. Interspersed among these various recognizable forms are excerpts from historical journals, found (literally) correspondence, newspaper stories, excerpts from *The*

*Books of Charles Fort; Johann Most, Terrorist of the Word*, by Max Nomad; and *The Biography of Alice B. Toklas*.

Newby's subjects range from the plight of farmers settling eastern Montana in the late 1800's, to the documented desire of Gertrude Stein to visit Helena, Montana, where "no one is stout," to the hospital ruminations of Samuel Beckett, recovering from a knife attack in which one of his lungs was pierced. Along the way, Newby visits the lives of Emma Goldman, Vincent Van Gogh, and Malcolm Lowry, author of *Under the Volcano*. Other characters — John Curnutt, Minnie Miller — are not nearly so well-known. But whatever the scale or status of a character's life, Newby locates revealing details and situations, presenting them in such a fashion that we see characters in personal and oddly affecting moments.

Ultimately, it is Newby's voice that provides the glue for this epic cast. From the opening lines of "Manifesto," the book's first poem, we're presented with a voice that is both generous and assured, a voice that recalls Whitman or Joyce in the range and depth of its concerns.

Throughout the book, Newby returns to the theme of individual endurance. Be it Emma Goldman or J. E. Finch, Newby's primary interest is fleshing out the patterns that isolate and connect individuals.

Work and the land drive some characters beyond the point of stoicism to a grave indifference that matches the blankness of sky and wheat. The two photographs of a mother and daughter, cited in "A Photographic Essay in Three Parts," exemplify that progression. In the first, the mother and daughter are pictured scowling at the camera, determined, distrustful of the plentiful fields waving behind them. In the second, taken years later, they are "older now, thinner, their eyes dulled and too large for the bony faces. Locusts ankle deep and gnawing the leather from their boots." All that remains of their work and perseverance, of the bountiful years, is a "patch of yellowed stubble along the south fence."

Earlier in the essay, through the use of reports in the *Belt Mountain Miner* (Barker, MT), Newby relates the story of a man for whom the isolation of a cattleman's life proved too much. He quotes the letter John Curnutt left for a friend prior to his "Mysterious Disappearance: 'When you read this I will be far away. Don't try to find me . . . I have been more dead than alive. I am going where no one will see me anymore. Take everything I have on earth . . . I once thought I could be happy, but now I know that I can't.'"

Another letter follows shortly in the essay, this one written by the previously unknown J. E. Finch to the then-Governor Erickson. "I am an old man, 70 years old. I and my old wife at the present have one baking of flour left and one pound of coffee. We have no credit and no work. Our 400 acres of crop is utterly destroyed . . . In a short time the Bank will take our stock and other creditors our Machinery. We have lived here 20 years and I have paid \$3500 in taxes since I have been in Montana and this is the end. What can you or anyone do about it?" As it turned out, Mr. Finch might as well have written a letter to God.

Newby presents the stories of Curnutt and Finch without romanticizing their lives. Appropriate to the inclusion of newspaper accounts, these stories of financial and spiritual bankruptcy are reported with objectivity, emphasizing the stark realities of life outside the ready-made community, where endurance and determination are prized above all other human virtues. Like Ed Lahey and Nancy Schoenberger before him, Newby has found a strain of essential truth in the lives of Montanans, in the recognition of human limitations as a guard against the alluring deception of the

wishful imagination. Despite the fact that his writing displays very few of the overt, tell-tale signs of “Western” writing, in *A Radiant Map of the World*, Rick Newby touches very close to the heart of Montana: to the generosity and suspicion of its people, the stoic crankiness that is the legacy of ancestors who arrived here expecting more than they got, who felt betrayed and had no one but themselves to blame, who frequently aged to resemble the land they had mined or farmed. Newby conveys, with empathy and authenticity, the isolation and defeat, the tug-of-war between despair and resolve.

Once he establishes the terms of his world, Newby proceeds to explore how characters go about living with them. Similar to Nancy Schoenberger’s *The Taxidermist’s Daughter*, Newby’s book acknowledges the dangers of expectations, then goes on to discover beauty, grace, celebration and hope amidst discouraging realities. Again like Schoenberger, Newby arrives at these discoveries through an imaginative sense that is not wishful or fanciful, but rooted in the very realities that threaten its disappearance. What finally distinguishes *A Radiant Map of the World* from the books that precede it is Newby’s combined use of art and human love to stake his optimistic claim.

The title piece, an effective marriage of the long poem and journal styles, best exemplifies his claim. Very simply, “A Radiant Map of the World” concerns itself with the speaker’s emergence and development as a writer. In addition, throughout the piece, Newby addresses, in some of the most eloquent and affectionate language I’ve read, the pleasures of love and sex.

Of writing, Newby says: “I began to write, out of necessity or desire . . . Here in this mountain fastness, I take notes . . . For winter is my time of writing. Out of my spring and summer foraging and my fall gathering together, my writing comes. Hard-earned, difficult. The final flush of a great pleasure.”

Of love and sex he writes:

“We sip chilled white wine, we return to our books, the humming typewriter, we are alone, but not lonely, in this cabin at the end of the road.”

“My companion walks naked from the bathroom. Morning showers: beads of moisture on her flat belly, her slender thighs, the breasts I take into my palms — so cold — and roll, nipples harder than agates. She crouches to me, her wet hair plastered back, red and thick, accenting features sharp as the razor I never use. *Good Morning*. Her fingers curl into my beard.”

Later, in the poem “Letter to Oregon from Montana,” Newby again extols the pleasures and the power of renewal he finds in physical intimacy:

“Tonight, my cat swims across the floor. And I caress a woman’s thigh, touch the essential dampness. In that bottomless, liquid well, my fingers drown and drown again. Her breath quickens, her soft breasts rise before they fall. *Writers speak a stench*, said Kafka. He was sorely mistaken, that fearful, saturnine man. Her scent — *of seaweed and stale sweets* — still lingers on the hand that writes these words.”



By book's end, it has become clear that in Newby's world, this earthy, intimate beauty exists *because* of those hard facts that stand in opposition, not in spite of them. Like Schoenberger, Newby's celebrations become a matter of conscious will and choice, revealed by a lush, generous imagination, and a voice whose grace often masks its essential strength:

"Asleep, the woman smiles and stretches, arranging her limbs. She is composing: a song, a lyric of ecstasy. With her body, her round, Grecian form, she composes the simple verses. They are not to be sung. They will not translate. They must be danced. In a softly glowing bed, at the hour when rain is music."

1982: *Birds That Stay* by Susan Watson  
Judges: Ripley Schemm, Earl Ganz  
Arrow Graphics, Missoula: 1982

In *Birds That Stay*, her collection of twenty-three poems, Susan Watson sticks close to home. In fact, home may well be the book's pivotal concern. Throughout her poems, Watson longs for the physical and emotional haven a home can be. In "Flowers," Watson writes:

"And they will heal like a mother  
who decorates her Victorian home  
with bright zinnia and chrysanthemum  
after she has worked with the dirt  
growing what is beautiful  
and green."

"Little Gifts" reiterates the theme:

"In this cold Victorian house, somewhere an absolute calm  
wants to breathe. When it did, I could crawl inside,  
wait for this storm to die."

Home is also the setting for several of the poems: "Feeling Chinese," "Hydrated Quartz Is Called Moonstone," "Autumn Equinox," "Accepting Poison," "After the French Movie," "Little Gifts." Each of these poems addresses the idea of home in individual ways. In "Feeling Chinese," and "Hydrated Quartz Is Called Moonstone," home is the still point in the midst of a whirling flux that allows the speaker time to bathe, reflect, prepare for the inevitable venturing back outside. In "Autumn Equinox," home is a place where you retreat to nurse aches and ills. "Little Gifts" expands the notion of home so that it becomes a metaphor for another of Watson's central concerns, the distinction and interaction between the internal and the external worlds:

“Downstairs a woman is crying while her husband watches television. Thick voices break through my floor when I would blanket my body in another winter, quilts with clear symmetrical pattern, and the white pills you brought back from Butte.”

Throughout *Birds That Stay*, the external world, most often seen as the literal out of doors, is revealed as a place of beauty, wonder and size; also a place of violent weather, potential tragedy and constant risk. The problem inherent in the relationship between the two worlds is how to participate in the wonder, witness the beauty, and minimize the risk.

As the title suggests, Watson is not a tourist. Having chosen Montana both as a home and a frequent subject for her poems, she discards the idea of leaving when the weather turns bad. More than once, she stresses the distinction between those rootless souls that leave at the first signs of discomfort, and those who dig in.

Home, of course, implies family, and family further implies the relationship between men and women. For Watson, this relationship poses greater threats to personal well-being than an entire winter of blizzards and icy roads. Although she asserts, in “There Is No Spring Here,” that deceit is strong in both Montana weather and the human tongue, it is the human phenomenon of love that leaves the lasting scars. The desire for home and family can cause one to seek love and permanence in situations much too fragile to last. More often than not, Watson’s poems explore the dissipation of intimacy:

“In an empty bed, sheets recall bodies,  
lovers making believe or making love.  
I can hear your bird sounds rising  
to a pitch that reminds me of panic.  
Here is your scent, thin black hair, odd sock  
you left. You are leaving. All the reasons you carve  
careful as a poem, do not utter anything else.”

What finally matters in *Birds That Stay* is that we persist. Despite lovers who never loved her, despite a man that buys “a truck for my son who wants someone to play trucks with,” despite fate and the often indifferent elements, despite rage and domestic violence, persistence and faith are essential. And in those moments when the speaker feels the whole weight of the world, feels completely alone in the rearing of her son, and suspects romantic love is too rife with deception to ever trust, there is always the intimacy of plants and earth, birds and sky, mother and son. There are the rituals of gardening and cooking, the cultivating of vision. These are all expressions of love, of the connections between internal and external, sky and earth, human and animals.

Once she establishes this pattern of complementary notions in opposition, Watson is free to explore the possibilities of synthesis. Children, in the context of the book, are the ideal embodiment of synthesis, or at least the speaker’s hopes for synthesis, for common ground:

“You pick up the litter of toys, pick up  
a body of bones and white skin, guard over  
your child’s rhythmic breathing, imagine  
his beautiful dream of leaf-eating dinosaur,

cloud butterfly, and dragon; then work  
into another morning: steaming the harvest  
for December, preparing the tea an old woman  
told you would fix everything that is inside dying.”

Most importantly, Watson finds hope for reconciliation of her often fragmented surroundings in the vigilance with which one attends to the world. In “Birds,” Watson writes, “This is love: we let birds understand our reverence for all they have become in their lonely flight.” And in “Flowers,” the poem that closes the book, Watson finds sustenance in the lessons of flowers, lessons that evoke, simultaneously, several of Watson’s concerns:

“Then, as you drift to the lullaby,  
they explain their mystery,  
their ancient flower secret: how to close  
how to open, open then close, and open again.”

*Birds That Stay* is an attractively designed and written book. At her best, Watson uses the objects and rituals of home to reveal essential understandings and truths. Many poems do just that. However, there is a curious, lingering distance in several of the poems that prevents both author and reader from becoming fully engaged. Oddly enough, in a book overflowing with organic and botanical imagery, I wanted more, more immediate and arresting details, more real dirt under the fingernails.

*Birds That Stay* has its moments, for which Watson deserves praise. It is a book that not only speaks well for what she has already written, but also for what she has yet to write.

1983: *Small Mercies* by Elizabeth Weber

Judges: James Crumley, Madeline DeFrees  
Owl Creek Press, Missoula (forthcoming)

As the sixth and most recent selection in the First Book Award series, *Small Mercies* brings us brilliantly up to date on the condition of the emerging Montana literature. In the twenty-five poems she’s collected in this volume, Elizabeth Weber displays both a high degree of craftsmanship and a commitment to meaningful content. Most impressive, however, is her voice, certainly as substantial and eloquent as you’re likely to see in a first book.

Much of *Small Mercies’* tone is somber. “All Gone,” the book’s first poem, opens with these lines:

“Most times, wind forgets this hill, the lilac  
calm in the shade of basswood. The laundry,  
limp on the line, starches in the August sun.  
In the doze of noon, where sparrows  
flee to the next county, a barn  
dies of inertia, and roads mislay direction.  
Each day, I take my hoe and hack  
at the long furrows with corn in between.  
Each day, the world gives me back my name.”

From the outset, we are presented with unvarnished and uneasy circumstances. Though landscape is one of the book's major themes and concerns, Weber never lapses into the facile romanticism that characterizes much of landscape poetry. In this regard, the influence of Richard Hugo is apparent, as it is in nearly all of the First Book Award selections. It is certainly to the credit of the writers involved, particularly Elizabeth Weber, that Hugo's presence never goes beyond influence — or, perhaps, inspiration — never threatens the poems with the mark of imitation. That Weber has forged her own personal, internalized relationship with the landscape is testimony to her skill as a poet and the integrity of her voice.

The book's opening poem also introduces many of the specifics of Weber's world:

“Last week a neighbor ran his daughter  
down with a tractor, thinking her a rock.  
The night breezes carry his wails, and his wife  
carries his troubles. I stare at the way  
the lines in my palms tell my fate, and hope  
for rain to soothe the alfalfa.”

In the stanza that follows, Weber addresses the death of someone much closer to her:

“. . . So it must have been  
for my grandmother who left me this place  
and went to the grave clinging  
to my hand and a belief in eternal  
happiness. No peace was in her gray eyes, no  
light cracked through the windows  
when the air rushed from her broken mouth.

I went out. The hills in the west  
exploded. The fields emptied  
with the cry of locusts.”

The speaker of this poem not only grieves for her grandmother and the nameless daughter, she grieves for herself. This is a position many poets would be reluctant to take, and one that no doubt sacrifices a certain amount of altruism and purity of heart, in turn risking the reader's sympathies. Weber's risk pays off. What emerges from her admission is the ring of honesty and vulnerability. Whether it comes at the freak hands of a tractor, or the slow grip of age, death is tragic, irretrievable, and wrong. And despite the myriad human ways of deflecting the impact of death, Weber chooses to face it head on, knowing in the end there is no final understanding or reconciliation. There are the facts, and there is how we live with them.

In the book's fourth poem, “In the Outfield,” Weber speaks of another death close to her, that of her brother, this time in the form of direct address:

“The sniper went to the heart:  
He pulled the trigger.  
It was all he could do.  
The thin beat you heard was just that—  
blood that stops in a second  
and turns black in the air.”

Again we see the poet internalizing the death:

“Dear Bill, the monarchs swarmed  
without you this September.  
Goldenrods blazed.  
All I could do was stand  
in the outfield and watch them  
explode in the sky.”

What distinguishes “In the Outfield” from “All Gone,” and other poems in the book that deal with the loss and emptiness of death, is Weber’s urgent and doomed attempt to understand its cause:

“Across the street  
one light is left  
in a restaurant. A girl  
rubs the counter so mold  
won’t grow. I watch her  
like a sniper. She cleans  
everything once  
and her heart is like mine.  
One shot and she would fall  
like the cloth she holds.  
The light goes out—no light,  
no girl, no heart.

I don’t know how  
it was that day.  
Perhaps the sniper sat  
while the world throbbed into place.  
Perhaps, brother,  
butterflies, swarmed in your eyes.”

All this talk of death might lead one to believe that Weber is assuming some variant on the tragic, poetic pose, which is always a danger when one chooses to write about such things. Weber is fully aware of the danger. Her poems may well deal often with the tragic, but there are no poses in *Small Mercies*, no false or dishonest notes. Nor is it Weber’s intention to paint an unrelieved picture of despair. Rather, she is interested in avoiding deceptively easy answers and reconciliations. *Small Mercies* is rooted in the firm belief that we must look at the world’s and our own circumstances honestly, with a critical and unflinching eye. If, after a good hard look, we can still hear the rumblings of hope, can still find reasons for optimism in the world as it is, then maybe we’ve stumbled across the real thing: hope that can sustain us. In any case, such hope is not easily discovered. Like Nancy Schoenberger and Rick Newby before her, Weber expresses a belief that optimism in the modern world is not bestowed, but earned.

As the book develops, you can begin to understand the appropriateness of its title, and the Tennessee Williams quotation that inspired the title, and which Weber uses as an epigram:

“Life is full of little mercies  
like that, not big mercies, but

comfortable little mercies. And so  
we are able to keep on going.”

(from *Summer and Smoke*)

In “Sachertorte,” Weber again addresses the issue of how individuals respond to the hard lives and circumstances that surround them:

“Perhaps this land is too bright,  
hills, grass, towns and people  
washed to nothing, and we come back  
to where we started, not caring  
if little Arturo’s father  
gets drunk and beats him, or Sabriana  
has syphilis, because, after all, this is what  
the world is.”

Later in the poem she suggests one of the book’s small mercies, its brief respites:

“And this sadness  
you drag along like a cat is not sadness.  
It is perhaps that your blood  
craves something sweet,  
a Sachertorte, a kind word, here or there.  
We strain towards something  
we can name, that light that springs  
from the fountain,  
until fields waving madly disappear  
with this thin sorrow that keeps us.”

As Rick Newby did in *A Radiant Map of the World*, Weber discovers cause for celebration in sensuality and the act of love. In “Remedy,” desire makes its way through the world, finally blessing a woman “who breathes so chairs won’t hear, who doesn’t believe in the wheel that hums in her . . .” Weber wishes this woman engagement and fulfillment, and in the process shows how generous and loving the voice in these poems can be:

“May a thousand tongues swarm over that chest,  
a migration of swans wheel in an October sky,  
wings beating clear air. May fish stir

between those thighs,  
flicking tails as they go.  
May the hinges of the skull open,  
become sky and all the stars at night . . .”

There is much to admire in *Small Mercies*. These are poems to return to and be nourished by, poems that continually risk the poet’s inner self, continually address matters of emotional consequence. As yet, the book has not gone to print. It is certainly one to watch for, especially considering that Weber’s book emphasizes the possibility an honest voice always holds out, that the poems themselves become acts of courage and faith.

