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Clear Water on the Swan & Journeys into Open Country

Poems by John Holbrook

& Stories by Ron Fischer

Helena, Montana: SkyHouse, 1992.

\$9.95; paper.

Reviewed by Bob Hackett

SkyHouse Publishers has combined the winners of the Montana Arts Council's 1991-92 First Book Award Competition in a single book, which leaves the reader with a deeply stratified sense of place. Every valley, river, and sagging two-story rental house fits into its own groove of history and geography, each of which is intersected, and changed, by the people who pass through it. John Holbrook and Ron Fischer write about these stories, histories, and continuances in ways that reveal the possibility of seeing history and self in the West, and the range of expression that opens up when poetry and fiction work against each other.

The book opens with Missoula resident John Holbrook's title poem, "Clear Water on the Swan," and these first lines:

A man on the Swan takes trout
like himself—by the teeth.

We are at once grounded in place, our feet firm in the cold rush of river, and also in the mind of the poet, who is compelled to take himself "by the teeth" as part of the hard design of mountain and town. We are set up for strong language and image, and on this count Holbrook delivers.

In "Three Days on the Clark Fork River in View of the Hoerner Waldorf Mill," the poem begins, "I chip my way/ through three inch ice/ with the blue-tipped blade/ of an axe." The sense of vision and time promised by the title confronts us from the start, as we are left to feel the effect of the poem's images: ice chips flying in the chill of winter morning air, the echoing crack of axe on ice between the valley's snowy walls, the duration of the task as the hole is carved.

Later in the poem

. . . Sunlight floods
the riprap ridge
along the river's edge
that holds several
thousand acre
settling ponds in place.

The temporality of light and dams delivers a foreboding sense of change and time.

In "Petition to Common Sense," a poem James Dickey chose as the winner of the 1990 Florida Poetry Contest, a woman stops her car on the side of the interstate after running over a box turtle. The poem moves from object, the dead turtle, to the woman's mind:

As she pulled at tufts of grass,
as flies began to hover the loss,
she could only guess
if wilderness ever listened.

This leap into mind is as characteristic of Holbrook's poems as the keenly seen reality of nature. But at times the jump seems elusive, too spare and undeveloped, especially when the language remains tough-edged.

Returning to the man in "Clear Water on the Swan," the second stanza of the poem begins:

Other men come to an end.
Contemporary, like vegetables,
they have no flair for the sun
unless it meets them half way.

The language is raw and muscled, but what it's trying to say gets lost in the tight turns that work so successfully in other spots. The idea that men, like vegetables, need sunlight to thrive, as long as it's not too intense for too long, is well-taken and convincing. But the "contemporary" throws the reader off track, especially since the

greater idea of contemporaneousness, the sense of being here now, in this particular time and place in the continuum of history, is one of Holbrook's best-earned achievements.

And the collection itself is an achievement; the turns of mind that elude are sophisticated considerations of life, nature, and place. The concluding poem, "Letter Back to Michigan," poses questions that define Holbrook's vision of his poetry and his search for meaning in the setting of his life. "Listen," the letter says, "you'd think as things happen, / scenery would be enough." It never is, but Holbrook boldly explores the territory of what might be.

The title of Anaconda native Ron Fischer's "Journeys Into Open Country" is deceptive, in that the stories are rooted in the mining towns of Anaconda and any openness of country is undercut by the boundaries of each character's life. Fischer offers a promise in the book's title that he knows each story longs for, but ultimately, by being so well-grounded in a lifetime of the author's observations and experiences, remains beyond reach.

We can't ask for better craft. Every story draws us into a scene, a family, a situation that is immediately compelling; something is at stake from the opening sentences. Consider the opening line of "Borders and Anaconda Streets," the collection's first story: "Mrs. Novich, the lady next door, is loading everything she owns into Roman Sand's truck." We *know* there's a story here.

The child narrator goes on to tell about restlessness, transience, mine strikes, religious conflict, hard times, and adolescence; and he's absolutely convincing. The prose is always interesting, with some passages standing out in the way they handle imagery and association. For example, when the narrator, a Jewish boy, is caught fighting in the Catholic schoolyard by Sister Ralph: "She looked old as the school, probably laid its bricks. Her hands were as big as bricks, and her voice sounded like a wall of them toppling." The movement from edifice and posterity to a cascade of those very same bricks, all

through sharp corporeal reference, is a good example of the kind of writing that Fischer sustains throughout the collection's six stories. By the time the story comes to its close, we're right back at the opening scene with Mrs. Novich loading her possessions into Roman Sands' truck, but now we know why.

"The Recital" works in the same way. It opens on a gray day in Vienna with a pair of lovers on a courtyard bench. The narrator, spying on them, is called back to his childhood in Montana by a woman in the next apartment playing an etude by Debussy. After exploring the narrator's broken relationship with his brother and a failed music recital in grade school, we finally return to the opening moment of the now-empty Vienna courtyard.

The collection closes with a powerful story which takes its title from a veteran miner, Manus Dugan, who is caught below as a fire burns deep within the mine. It's a story about the stand everyone in Fischer's stories takes against the very source of their lives. Miners are pitted against the labyrinth of the mine itself, workers fight against themselves for survival, families face the reality of an always lurking danger. In the miners we see the ethnic diversity that characterizes the mainly European-based populations of the Butte and Anaconda communities, while in "Badlands" Fischer writes about the Mexican shacktowns and Black communities in a nameless prairie town along the banks of the Yellowstone River.

Both Fischer and Holbrook know their territory, and handle their craft well enough to create a lasting art. Sam Hamill (poetry), editorial director of Copper Canyon Press, and Lynda Sexson (fiction), author of *Margaret of the Imperfections* and *Ordinarily Sacred*, were the judges. They have selected two writers who explore rather than stereotype the limits and truths of a place and its inhabitants to share the First Book Award. Montanans have good reason to be pleased with their choice.