

## DISCOVERING A DISTINGUISHED WRITER'S FIRST BOOK OF POEMS

By Eleanor Berry

For the past several decades, George Venn has been a prominent figure among Oregon contemporary writers. Widely acclaimed for his essays and stories as well as his poetry, Venn is also recognized for his work as an editor and scholar. In 2002 he retired from Eastern Oregon University, where he had taught in the English/Writing program since 1970. He continues to live and write in the Grand Ronde Valley.

Recently, browsing among the books in the Oregon Poetry Collection at the State Library, I came upon Venn's first book of poems, *Off the Main Road*, published in 1978. Beautifully designed, with drawings by artist Don Gray on the cover and at the beginning of each of the four sections, it is a pleasure to peruse. The poetry and the art complement each other perfectly. Both convey a deep and respectful knowledge of a place and its inhabitants.

The first tone sounded in the poems is celebration of life in its full sensuous richness. The opening poem, "Fall Dance," celebrates the sweetness of the apples blown down by "a short cold storm." These windfalls are not lost:

We'll start the press  
tomorrow and watch  
their juice run into  
jugs that save  
their lives.

The poem closes zestfully: "Next year / vinegar, wine. Ha!"

In a similar spirit, Venn celebrates, in "Poem Against the First Grade," the malapropisms and mispronunciations of his young son. Inveighing against school teachers who would correct away all "unbroken joy with words," he borrows from the boy's sound-drunk vocabulary:

Thumping the pano keys  
like a mudpie chef,

he goes wild with words  
at the wittle wooden  
arms inside, a hundred  
Pinoschios to singsong.

A mischievous spirit is also evident in a few poems that tell of unlikely interactions with birds. “Vulture” and “Osprey” are tall tales somewhat reminiscent of Native American stories. Like Coyote, the narrator of these tales is a little too smart for his own good. “Bird Talk” is a whimsical account of this poet’s sources—the supposed speech of a magpie and a chicken:

What you hear me say is  
only what I’ve been told  
somehow by this wild  
black and white thief of  
all that gleams and this  
creator of brown egg still  
warm in my hand.

While there is much celebration in the poems of *Off the Main Road*, there is also unflinching acknowledgment of darkness and pain. In one of the most moving poems, “Forgive Us . . . ,” the poet addresses his grandfather, recalling the lesson he had taught, by many examples, that killing should be as swift and painless as possible. Animals killed for meat “knew your one quick stroke across / their throats would make their ends / the best you could create.” The speaker in the poem broods on the cruel irony that this kind man should be dying slowly, with much suffering. He blames the divine Shepherd his grandfather had faithfully served:

Oh, he’s a shoddy butcher, Grandfather.  
He’s making you suffer his rusty dull  
deathknife for years, crippling your legs,  
then cutting off your speech to tremble,  
then tying you up in a manured bed.

All of the poems in this early book by George Venn reflect a deep knowledge of the land, people, and economy of the rural northwest. In “Early Morning: Washington 12 Toward

Ohanapecosh,” the speaker declares, “I could be farming that homestead,” and “I could be a gyppo sleeping in that shack.” We can believe him because of the particulars he supplies:

*Here* means my first father died,  
my uncles lives, my brother played summers  
away in grandfather’s timothy and clover.  
I know the faller’s ax, polaski, froe,  
peavy, scythe, the crosscut saw.