

A SALEM POET FROM THE SOUTHERN OREGON COAST

By Eleanor Berry

Among the books on the shelves of the Oregon Poetry Collection at the State Library is one titled *A Mutable Place*, published in 2003 by Traprock Books. On its front cover is a drawing of a house backed by pasture with a stream running behind it, forested hills rising from the far bank. On the back cover is a photograph of the same place.

That place, as becomes clear from the poems inside, is the farm near Bandon where the poet grew up, a place mutable both in itself and in the poet's relation to it.

The poet is Virginia Corrie-Cozart, and the drawing on the book's front cover is also her work. An Oregon poet with a deep attachment to the state's southern coast, she lived for the past four decades in Salem, where she taught music in the public schools and, after retirement, participated actively in groups of artists and poets until her death last month at the age of 80.

Co-founder and co-chair of the Mid-Valley Poetry Society, she wrote one of the first columns for this Poet's Corner. Her article on Howard McKinley Corning, an Oregon poet of an earlier generation, appeared in the March 11th issue of the *Statesman Journal*. Always modest about her own achievements, she would not have imagined herself as the subject of such a column, though Corning, who published and awarded a prize to one of the poems subsequently collected in *A Mutable Place* and encouraged its young author in a letter that she carefully preserved, might well have done so.

On the pages of *A Mutable Place*, Corrie-Cozart's linguistic skill and reflective power combine with her painter's eye and musician's ear to evoke the home landscape and community that she left as a young, college-bound woman and to which she returned often, both in memory and for actual visits.

Through the words of “Randolph Club Ladies,” readers can see the forest of farm-wives’ sturdy legs surrounding the child nestled under their quilt table, hear “Myrtle’s recipe for pickles, / how Jessie’s peas were coming on strong / having been planted with the moon.”

Through the lines of “Leaving by Greyhound,” readers can follow the gaze of the half-grown girl on her way to college, as, yearning back and imagining ahead, she “tried to see all ways at once, / but the Coast Range blocked the view back.”

In the spare stanzas of “Moon,” readers can see with the young mother the full moon that came up at bedtime “like Jersey /cream,” and later, when she was roused by barking dogs, was still there, “skimmed blue / midway to morning.”

In the elegiac passages of “Going Away,” readers can watch with the woman who “observed from a distance” as “the young people” improvised an August picnic on the beach, listen with her to their “guitar tossing away / chords like summer promises.”

In the lyric narrative of “Return to Coos County,” readers can hear with the woman whose children have grown the bewildered attempts at conversation of people seeing each other at a picnic reunion after a gap of many years:

Fern asks me what my mother
is doing these days.
“Mom’s been gone several years,” I tell her.
We’re both confused.
“I mean, your mom up in Salem.”
“That’s me,” I squeak.

In its beautiful closing lines, readers can feel the tenderness infusing the poet’s vision as she imagines her husband’s body and her own, joined in their embrace, as following the contours of the landscape she has loved all her life: “I pretend his arms are the Coos County hills, / me, the Coquille Valley”