

A POET WHO CALLS UMAPINE HOME

by Eleanor Berry

Ronald H. Bayes has spent most of his adult life in North Carolina, where he has been writer-in-residence at St. Andrews College since 1968. But he was born in Oregon, grew up in the small northeastern Oregon farming community of Umapine, and earned his Bachelor's and Master's degrees and began his teaching career at Eastern Oregon College (now Eastern Oregon University).

Thus his poetry belongs in the Oregon Poetry Collection at the Oregon State Library, and it was on its shelves at the end of the reference room that I discovered *The Casketmaker: Selected Shorter Poems, 1960-1970*. Bayes, born in 1932, was a young man when he wrote the poems in this book, and some of them reflect a young man's experience falling into—and out of—love, serving in the military, mourning a beloved grandfather. They also exhibit a remarkable cosmopolitanism, in both life and art.

There are poems set in the British Isles, in Iceland, and in Southeast Asia and Japan. There are several translations of Japanese poems. There are poems dedicated or referring to major American modern and postmodern poets—Ezra Pound, Louis Zukofsky, Randall Jarrell, Robert Creeley. Many are written in a style reflecting the influence of those avant garde masters—sparse free verse where connections are not made explicit but left for the reader to infer.

This collection of poems written when Bayes was in his thirties includes satires of social and academic pretension. It also includes many instances of empathy and compassion for fellow humans struggling against poverty. A poem set in Southeast Asia recalls a “little Cambodian boy / with rotting teeth” who was asking “for a pen / so he could continue / his English / lessons.” The final passage of the poem addresses that young beggar directly:

Boy,
I hope you got your pen
and will live
to write well

Among the many poems of travel is one called “Going South,” a narrative lyric of a winter bus ride starting in North Washington that the poet had joined in Milton-Freewater. He observes an impoverished couple, notices how little they have, and overhears the man saying to his wife, “It’s getting warmer / already,’ / ... / ‘We’re in Oregon now, you know.’” Noting that it was “twelve above outside,” the poet wonders how the couple could keep up “this poor pretense at hope,” but recognizes “they had to and they knew and I knew and I wanted with them.”

As a young man, Bayes traveled and read widely. But he also maintained a strong attachment to his Oregon home and to poets he got to know here. A poem called “In Dumbarton” catalogs sights and encounters in Scotland, Ireland, and England—glimpses where “I could code no meaning,” contacts in which “focus almost came steady”—then literally comes home:

Six years ago when I went home
a new and mongrel pup tore down
a clothesline;
stole wash cloths, towels, and underdrawers,
home, there at Umapine.

Another poem tells what “The Burning of the Imperial Café on Depot Street” meant to the small town: “Pasts and dreams / sent out to hope to find a new joint / to feel pretty much at home in any time” There is even a “Love Poem to My Town” and a short one “for Bill and Dorothy Stafford” in which the speaker clearly identifies with the ways of his native place:

On the signing of letters it can be said
that where I come from we
all sign our letters
“love”
because failing
like who doesn’t
we try to neverless to.