

PASSIONATE VIRTUOSO

By Christopher Wicks

Oregon's own Judith H. Montgomery, a Bend poet who was the 2000 winner of the Oregon Book Award in Poetry, succeeds equally in formal poetry and in free verse. She has an individual style and particular themes that speak regardless of the form of her verse.

Montgomery's books of poems—*Passion*, *Red Jess*, and *Pulse and Constellation*—have the same finesse, emotional intensity, and sense of voice, whether the skeleton of the poem is a sonnet, a villanelle, or a looser structure. Even when she addresses everyday subjects, her careful attention to the musical aspects of language and to imagery let readers know they are in the presence of poetry.

Montgomery is one of several prominent poets in our area whose education took place primarily in the East, in her case, with a PhD in American Literature from Syracuse University in New York. After receiving her doctorate, she lived for many years in Portland before moving with her husband to Bend. Seen at times as a voice of the “boomer” generation of American women writers, Montgomery often addresses spiritual themes with fresh language, free of hackneyed propaganda.

Her villanelle “The Metaphysics of Insomnia” shows the characteristic strengths of her poetry. A villanelle is a French traditional form, a 19-line poem in six stanzas, in which each of the later lines rhymes with either the first or the second. Also, particular complete lines are repeated at certain points. The poetic ideas and language must be compelling, since they recur several times during the poem. Here, the form suits the theme: Montgomery's speaker is ruminating on her inability to sleep on a moonlit night:

The moon pours her white waterfall of sleep
Down a scarp of stars to flood the earth.
I have no bucket, and the well is deep.

The poem presents us with a paraphrase of the meeting of Christ and the Samaritan woman at the well. By the final stanza, a subtle change in the wording of the repeated lines tells us that our speaker has had an insight bringing the calm that had eluded her:

What we desire may not be what we seek.
Still wide awake, I play with this new verse:
The moon pours her white waterfall of sleep.
I am the bucket, and the well is deep.

The form is no imposition or constraint, but rather corresponds authentically to the emotional evolution of the speaker's frame of mind. Readers who are willing to enter Montgomery's world of striking metaphors, rich allusion, and heartfelt expression have many similar treasures awaiting them.