

**Testimony: MONTANA POETRY PROJECT
Cultural and Aesthetic Grant Proposal**

No place is a place until it has had a poet, wrote preeminent Western writer Wallace Stegner. No place, not even a wild place, is a place until it has had that human attention that at its highest reach we call poetry.

Background

Governor Brian Schweitzer signed a bill during the 2005 legislative session to establish Montana's Poet Laureateship. He saw the first appointment to this position as a legacy and selected poet and professor Sandra Alcosser; she, in turn, met with representatives of the Montana Arts Council, the Montana Committee for the Humanities, the Montana Center for the Book, Independent Booksellers, Writers Voice and Drumlummon Institute to determine how best to articulate and celebrate the legacy of Montana through the voices of its poets.

Believing that poetry is a catalyst for building vital communities, Alcosser invited poet and professor Tami Haaland of Billings to join her in hosting Montana Poetry: A Conversation at the Montana Festival of the Book in Missoula, and Montana Poetry: A Celebration under the Capitol Rotunda in Helena. Each event attracted large and diverse groups of poets, poetry lovers, and community leaders from around the Northwest.

Alcosser and Haaland, both award-winning poets, now propose to carry that celebration of place and history forward through the Montana Poetry Project. They plan to:

- Create a website of Montana poets (already under development) to provide poems, biographical statements, audio clips, and lesson plans accessible to any school, library, and home with internet connection. A primary audience will be K-12 teachers and students. The site will link to national sites, including The Academy of American Poets (<http://www.poets.org>), which will raise visibility for Montana's historic and contemporary poets.
- Assemble an anthology of historic and contemporary Montana poetry.
- Continue to develop a Montana poetry center at MSU-Billings Library by expanding the collection of books and recordings.

Request and Proposed Expenses

We have revised the proposal to cover our first priority: the completion of a website of Montana poets. To date, we have researched historical records to find Montana poets, collected bibliographies, poems and audio recordings for the website, and planned the website database and appearance with web developers. Additionally we have made initial contact with teachers and poets to ask for their assistance in developing lesson plans, sending author biographies, poems, and links.

Selections from the Montana Poetry Project

Whatever place
I come on trouble
my death will not be there

I shall pass through

though there may be many arrows
I shall reach
where I am going

as the heart of a man should be
mine is

*Crow Texts edited by Robert Lowie
Translated by W. S. Merwin
Selected Translations 1968-1978*

Song of the Bald Eagle

we want what is real
we want what is real
don't deceive us!

Crow

Love Song

A loon I thought it was
But it was
My love's
Splashing oar.

*Chippewa Song
Collected and Translated by Frances Densmore*

A Woman's Song

You are walking around
Trying to remember
What you promised,
But you can't remember.

Chippewa Song
Translated by Frederick R. Burton

Coming Away

I meant to walk once more
On my old, old lawn,
But it began to pour,
And I had no rubbers on.

I meant to look once more
At my old, old place,
But the taxi window wore
A veil of liquid lace.

Marjorie Frost Fraser
Franconia, 1936

Montana Pastoral

I am no shepherd of a child's surmises.
I have seen fear where the coiled serpent rises,

Thirst where the grasses burn in early May
And thistle, mustard, and the wild oat stay.

There is dust in this air. I saw in the heat
Grasshoppers busy in the threshing wheat.

So to this hour. Through the warm dusk I drove
To blizzards sifting on the hissing stove,

And found no images of pastoral will,
But fear, thirst, hunger, and this huddled chill.

J. V. Cunningham
The Helmsman, 1942

A Word to God

Dear God, some day when You are done
With greater things, set right this one:

If there are women who like to sew,
And pile fresh linens, row on row;

And make hooked rugs and needle-point,
And crinkle pies, or trim a joint;

Grant finally that each one win
A home to love and keep things in.

But if a woman likes to walk
Even we streets, and stop to talk

To the florist's boy or the organ-grinder;
Then saunter on again, to find her

A glimpse of the sea—a place to ponder
Why some take root, and some must wander;

Or an empty church she doesn't belong to
With a saint or two to make a song to;

Or a jeweled breast to question whether
Gems are a chain, and love a tether;

Give her a whole sky for her wishes,
But never a roof—with brooms and dishes;

Then wrap all women in Your compassion,
Who weave Your garment in various fashion.

Grace Stone Coates
Portulacas in the Wheat, 1932

R. R. Yards

At night we walked in the darkness to work
In the railroad yards, switching engines

And greasing pistons in the shops. The lights
Above the tracks were heavy and never struck

The steel rails without gongs ringing signals.
The scarlet and emerald lanterns were myriad

Against the buildings. Our brows were sweaty
And our hands greased with labor. We always

Left at dawn. We could not stand it for long.
Sleeping in the daytime and working at night

When the girls were dancing in auditoriums.
We quit soon afterward—it was no time

For us to be slaves: we were young
And many nights were before us.

Norman McLeod

Whisper Meat

Jim Dawson has a bit of meadow ground,
And whitetail deer come out at night to feed
Upon his spuds. It isn't that they need
Those leaves. On every open hill around
There's bunch-grass pasture, green and summer-browned.
But almost every night, when skies are clear
(There's something mean about protected deer)
They'll trample down his field, without a sound.

When I drop in at Jim's, he makes me eat
And rest up if I'm tired from the trail.
But if I did just what the game law bids
Me do with men who serve up whisper meat,
The food I eat would put old Jim in jail.
Jim Dawson has a wife and four small kids.

John Frohlicher

The Last Crow

One crow did not fly, was loath to leave
The strawstack: there was shriveled and broken grain
In the new chaff. Black as a parson's sleeve,
So black his shadow made a paler stain
Where tufted grasses held white drifts of litter,
With swinging tail, with thin shanks lifted high,
He walked away, making a purple glitter.
His polished beak beyond his vitreous eye
Pointed this way and that as he picked his course
Through the dead foxtail and the withered mustard.
At last he, too, took flight and gave a hoarse
"Caw", on his way to where his fellows clustered.
From the bare cottonwoods another bird
Answered that clear, dispassionate, perfect word.

*Jason Bolles
Magpies Nest*

Night Hawk

He's worried about his rights.
They are clear: the air.
Night holds just one secret.
He doesn't know it
so he cries air, the air.

I know finicky secrets.
In the mountains, for instance,
a man lives close to his eyes.
For another, he speaks
with his hands. And another:
man is afraid of his dark.

*James Welch
Riding the Earth Boy 40*

The Meaning of Intimacy

Not reasoning, but romantic
prehistoric instinct
coaxes my whiskered cheek to the bristled
muzzle of a colt working long-stemmed timothy-brome
hay evenly inward. My heart beats brisk
time to the rhythm of grinding teeth
crunching tiny pipettes of perfume—sweet
breath and music piped through the pink
nostrils into February air, so still,
so microscopically cold, I see its molecules
misting leafy green. The simplest poetic gift,
if we listen close, sings to the most
primitive sound churning into vision. Graced,
late last night, I sat in the easy
breathing warmth of cottonwood burning
without the slightest wheeze,
not a single creaking from the pine
joints of the ninety-year-old house. In the whisper
and whiff of fresh pencil lead
pressed firmly into notebook pages
curling, I felt the cat
rest her chin against my wool-
stockinged toes—purring and purring
her aboriginal rhythms into the fur-
bearing nerves of my words.

For Verlena Orr and Georgia

*Paul Zarzyski
Wolf Tracks on the Welcome Mat*

Driving Montana

The day is a woman who loves you. Open.
Deer drink close to the road and magpies
spray from your car. Miles from any town
your radio comes in strong, unlikely
Mozart from Belgrade, rock and roll
from Butte. Whatever the next number
you want to hear it. Never has your Buick
found this forward a gear. Even
the tuna salad in Reedpoint is good.

Towns arrive ahead of imagined schedule
Absorakee at one. Or arrive so late—
Silesia at nine—you recreate the day.
Where did you stop along the road
and have fun? Was there a runaway horse?
Did you park at that house, the one
alone in a void of grain, white with green
trim and red fence, where you know you lived
once? You remembered the ringing creek,
the soft brown forms of far off bison.
You must have stayed hours, then drove on.
In the motel you know you'd never seen it before.

Tomorrow will open again, the sky wide
as the mouth of a wild girl, friable
clouds you lose yourself to. You are lost
in miles of land without people, without
one fear of being found, in the dash
of rabbits, soar of antelope, swirl
merge and clatter of streams.

Richard Hugo
The Lady in Kicking Horse Reservoir, 1973

Grandmother's French Hollyhocks

They were probably planted there by the gate
Or along the fence of the watergap lot,
Where the mild cows lazed and the work teams ate,
Chicken-wired out of the garden plot.

Why, didn't she know they'd scatter around,
Their seeds infecting our vegetable garden?
Magenta blooms fought for fertile ground,
Crowding and choking, begging no pardon

Of the carrots or beets in militant rows,
Cut down by the shrapnel of Gaulish genes,
From ambush, they fell like dominoes.
In retreat we skirmished to save the beans

For the canning jars, waiting empty and green,
Wide-mouthed as grackles with demanding maws
That would nourish during months snowy and lean,
When the hunger moon, grinning, flexed grizzled jaws.

"Foolish woman!" we thought, to be tempted by beauty.
"What could she be thinking?" so all of us said.
Our lives bound by the iron hands of duty,
Not frivolous flowers! Just beans, beef and bread.

Of course, no one complained (not to her face).
She surely repented the sin of her ways.
Her silent apology mitigated disgrace,
But the shame of her weakness she bore all her days.

She was guilty, of course—more guilty were we.
For beauty in life has strong healing powers.
Fifty years later, I'm beginning to see
The value of Grandmother's beautiful flowers.

Wallace McRae
New Cowboy Poetry

