FOREWORD REVIEWS THE INDIE WE LOVE.

Wild Sweet Notes: Fifty Years of West Virginia Poetry 1950-1999

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Kirk Judd
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"In West Virginia a good story takes awhile, / and if it has people in it, you have to swear / that it is true," Maggie Anderson confides in "Long Story," one of the hundreds of poems editors Smith and Judd—both West Virginia poets themselves—have gathered into this celebratory volume. The voices, lore, and landscape of the state resound distinctively in these works, though the editors have not restricted the poems' subject matter to the local; perhaps the most identifiable common elements are precise observation, a careful ear, a devotion to detail. In "Copper Wire," James Harms combines all these with a distinguishing syntax to describe an old man's solitary desert life: "A man walks out each morning on the wide sheet / of sand that shimmers into water to see if anyone / to see if she is bringing in the mail is part of the mail, / walks down the long rope of road to the highway, / the row of mailboxes…a row of names / he hasn't heard aloud in years, he hasn't heard / his name in years…."

Novelist and poet Jayne Anne Phillips, in a prose poem called "Cheers," lets us listen to a woman sewing a cheerleading outfit for a ten-year-old speaker: "I got part of it made up she said, fitting the red vest. You girls are about the same size as mine. All you girls are bout the same…. Her pointed white face was smudged around the eyes. I watched the pale strand of scalp in her hair….Lord, she said. You do look pretty." There's a straightforwardness to many of these poems, and the writers commemorate both the world's beauty and its cruelties: poverty, pain, and in particular, the hardships of life in the mines.

Published as part of the West Virginia Celebration 2000 campaign, the collection includes about 145 poets both renowned and beginning, living and deceased; the editors required only that a poet be born in West Virginia or have lived there at least five years, and been published in a nationally distributed publication. A reader need not have an extraordinary interest in West Virginia in order to enjoy these lucid and engaging contemporary poems.

Janet Holmes