Robert Sund died in 2001. He was a gentle man who celebrated ordinary things. This handout celebrates two books that have been published posthumously and provides some poems that augment his poems offered in Handout #5. In Anacortes, Washington there is a Robert Sund’s Poet’s House trust that promotes local poetry and the writing of Robert Sund

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New book captures late Northwest poet Robert Sund’s words

by Christian Martin

Robert Sund Credit: Copyright Erik Ambjor
Robert Sund is our bard of the Skagit River, a singer of songs celebrating skunk cabbage, frogs, muddy water, ducks, and the rising tide.
In the summer of 1973, the poet — who studied under Theodore Roetke at the University of Washington in the early 1950s — built a small dwelling on the pilings of a former fisherman’s shed in the estuary of the North Fork of the Skagit River. Access was only by boat and though his hermitage was only a short paddle from La Conner and downstream from the active artists’ colony at Fishtown, he felt worlds away, “far, far back,” from modern society.
This remove gave Sund time and space to closely observe the rhythms of the natural world, as well as the fluctuations of his own thoughts and emotions, and he recorded these impressions in a series of thin, 26-page notebooks. The tidal marsh surrounding his shack, formed where the glacier-fed Skagit mixed with the saltwater of Puget Sound, provided him with endless inspiration for more than a decade of on-again, off-again residency.
“Out on the river you know you are in the midst of a great creation,” he wrote. “You see the old work and the new work side by side: the ancient migration routes of all the birds, and the slow building of silt and soil in the estuary.”

The choicest tidbits from Sund’s 75-plus journals have been extracted and lightly edited to produce a new volume of work from the well-loved poet, who passed away in 2001. Assembled by Sund’s close friends Tim McNulty and Glenn Hughes, Notes from Disappearing Lake: The River Journals of Robert Sund presents poem-like journal entries documenting life in the Skagit River estuary alongside spiritual insights, weather reports, and pithy celebrations of friendship and community.
“Robert was obviously not there to advise us,” explains McNulty, “but he was definitely looking over our shoulder as we worked on this project. We excerpted material that was pretty much intact and didn’t need to do much editing. Robert’s voice was rough and authentic and we wanted to keep it that way. Several friends have read these pieces and said, ‘This is like spending time with Robert again.’”

July, 1973
Snipe walking through the flowers & grasses
picking worms & bugs out of the mud
Wren on the front porch
tiny feet
tick tick.
Robin, swallow
crow, seagull, heron
goldfinch, duck
blackbird . . .
Who needs a radio?
Song at morning
song at evening
and all day long . . .
  This is the real news:
  Local, regional, & world-wide.

Though he departed more than a decade ago, Sund’s unique voice, as expressed through his poems, painting, and calligraphy, has risen in repute since the 2004 publication of Poems from Ish River Country by prestigious publisher Shoemaker & Hoard, home of Gary Snyder, Robert Hass, and Wendell Berry. The Museum of Northwest Art’s successful Fishtown and the Skagit River exhibit in 2010 only heightened interest in the unique countercultural confluence of art, poetry, and spirituality that flourished in the Lower Skagit in the 1970s and ‘80s.
The recent attention paid to to this now-gone locality contrasts the original inhabitants’ desire to be left alone, hiding out in the marsh grasses where they could be free to pursue their alternative lifestyles.
  “(The) burgeoning community (of Fishtown) reflected the larger national impulse towards going back to the land, living simply, and disengaging from chaotic political and social events,” Kathleen Moles writes in Fishtown and the Skagit River, the catalog for the MONA exhibit.
Sund had a deep interest in Chinese literature of the Tang and Sung dynasties — as many drawn to Fishtown did — and his shack provided him a private place to live like the hermit poets he read at night by lantern light. The seclusion, hardships and exposure to the raw elements of storms, tides and bird migrations were a forge for his poetic aspirations.
  “A river mouth, in and of itself, exerts an influence on human consciousness that becomes manifest in music, literature, and art,” points out Skagit Valley novelist Tom Robbins in an essay in the MONA catalog.
Sund’s journals contained unvarnished etchings of that Skagit-flavored manifestation, and editors McNulty and Hughes’ work to unearth new material from their friend also revealed insights in to the poet’s methods.
  “Robert’s journals held his day-to-day notations; they’re perceptive, unique, sometimes dazzling, and of course poetic,” McNulty explains. “His observations offer keen insights into nature, record subtle personal reflections, and explore the experience of solitude in a wild, natural landscape. At the same time they’re often happy and joyful. The journals capture those aspects of Robert’s process, personality, and aesthetic in an immediate way. Chip and I had a great time exploring the journals and delighting one another with new discoveries.”
April 24, 1977  4 A.M.
In the excited mind
  words fly.
The night is still, the water still —
  & suddenly, in the mind
(as on the night river
  a beaver
breaks the silence)
the first ripple of a poem
swims almost invisible by the river bank.
Blades of grass standing in the river
    feel the waves rise and
    pass through them.

McNulty further says, “I see a marked contrast between the experience of Robert’s journals and the way
we’ve become so locked into gadgets and digital media. The idea of Thoreau-like experiences, of being
alone in stunningly beautiful landscape and following the mind’s drift on a daily basis…it can’t hurt.”

In light of this posthumous collection of Sund’s work, words he once wrote seem prophetic:

Maybe exalted gestures will be
    retrieved in our time.
Maybe our grandchildren will go through
    our trunks and boxes
    and be amazed.

Poems are copyright 2012 Robert Sund Poet’s House. An abbreviated version of this review
appeared in the Cascadia Weekly, May 9, 2012.

Returning to the Poetry of Robert Sund

Thanks to poet Tim McNulty, I own, and am enjoying, a new book published by Pleasure
Boat Studio in New York. The title is Notes from Disappearing Lake, and the subtitle is

I knew Robert (you’d be wrong to call him Bob) back when he was still sometimes
staying at his cabin on an estuary of the Skagit River, near La Conner, Washington in an
area known as Fishtown. These journal entries are pretty much poems, and Sund has
been widely praised, and recognized by key publishers, for his poetry. He is probably
best known for his volumes Bunch Grass, 1969, University of Washington Press, Ish
and Translations, 2004, Shoemaker & Hoard—which I used as a textbook when I was
Writer in Residence at Willamette University, 2005-06, in Salem, Oregon. Robert died
at age 72 in 2001, and that comprehensive volume was published posthumously.
However important his volumes have been, those who know and love Robert Sund’s poetry tend to treasure his limited edition chapbooks, which include *As Though The Word Blue Had Been Dropped Into The Water*, 1986, and *Why I Am Singing For The Dancer*, 1999—both published in hand-set letterpress editions by Rusty North at Sagittarius Press in Port Townsend, WA. His chapbook *Shack Medicine*, first published in 1990 by California’s Tangram Press in a letterpress printing, then reprinted in 1992 by The Poets’s House Press, is my own favorite of the smaller collections, and offers poems that are the most similar to those in *Notes From Disappearing Lake*. I should note that I found and was inspired by Sund’s first book *Bunch Grass* during my initial year as a graduate student, which was at Washington State University. WSU is in Pullman, at the eastern edge of the Palouse wheat-growing region—which is where the poems are rooted. I took the good news of his poetry to my students and colleagues when I transferred to Cornell University in 1971 to work on an MFA degree.

Here then are some samples of the poems in the 2012 volume *Notes from Disappearing Lake*:

**December, 1976**

Some men
reap their harvest daily,
like ducks
swimming about the bay as
tide descends,
gobbling water plants
with feathery heads
down under
ripply water,
never realizing
their ass is skyward &
open to the wind.

This poem is a fine example of some of Sund’s key characteristics as a poet: his detailed daily observations about the world around him, and his sense of humor. Also, like the majority of poems in this book, the poem carries the date it was composed.

He honored and learned from the great Chinese poets, and learned traditional calligraphy to enhance his own poems. He often embellished his poems with tiny drawings of mountain and island landscapes. *Notes from Disappearing Lake* opens with a reproduction of the calligraphy of a poem titled “October 12, 1973,” and it is punctuated by an image of mountains and an island watercourse.

In this next poem he not only identifies the date, but the time of day. He must have felt that composing a poem that early in the morning, the hour should be noted:
April 24, 1977  4 A.M.

In the excited mind
words fly.

The night is still, the water still —-
& suddenly, in the mind

(as on the night river
a beaver
breaks the silence)

the first ripple of a poem
swims almost invisible by the river bank.

Blades of grass standing in the river
feel the waves rise and
pass through them.

Here Sund finds an appropriate metaphor for his own poetic process, which implies that not only does he draw his inspiration from the environment, that environment physically experiences his poems. It should also be noted that he employed the ampersand (&) rather than the word “and”—in the process endowing his poems (even in print) with an aspect of calligraphy, as well as the minimalist clarity of the Chinese poetry he loved.

I will complete this gesture of appreciation for one of Washington State’s great poets, who had the grand good fortune to have studied with Theodore Roethke while a student at the University of Washington, with this beautiful observation:

July 20, 1985

After a hot day
cool night comes—
dark out in the marsh
dark on the island.
In the nightwind the
young shoots of willow
cry against the windowglass,
as the branches
bend and
spring back.

Event: Reading at Village Books Tuesday, May 15, 2012, 7pm with Tim McNulty
(All poems in this post by Robert Sund, from Notes from Disappearing Lake)
—James Bertolino
(www.jamesbertolino.com)
Robert Sund: Lost Harvest

I live near Seattle, on an island in Puget Sound, the salt body of water--arm of the Pacific Ocean--that sneaks into the middle of Western Washington, bordered by the Cascade Mountains (including Mount Rainier) to the east and the Olympics in the west. As most folks know, the climate tends to be wet, but that also means lots of flowing rivers available year-'round for irrigation and hydroelectric power.

A poet friend of mine named Robert Sund many years ago stated some of those facts more elegantly. (Sund consciously modelled his work and his life on the live-simple, subtly intellectual, boisterous-with-drink poets of ancient China; he studied calligraphy and often wrote his crisp, direct poems out longhand using some trusty ink bottle and favored pen or brush.)

"Ish River"
like breath,
like mist rising from a hillside.
Duwamish, Snohomish, Stillaguamish, Samish,
Skokomish, Skykomish... all the ish rivers.

I live in the Ish River country
between two mountain ranges where
many rivers
run down to an inland sea.

Robert died several years ago, and his subsequent collected poems volume inherited the title *Poems from Ish River Country*. We were pals way back in the late Sixties and early Seventies when I was actively writing poetry too. But to make a living I was also writing for King Screen, a company which had won several Emmys and Academy Awards for its documentary movies; since these weren’t bringing in much money, the company sought to continue by producing educational films as well.

One of my first suggestions—a film I’ve carried in my head unproduced for four decades now—was to show something like “a day in the life of the vast and beautiful wheat fields of Eastern Washington during harvest season.” Dawn to dusk, the big combines turning, the grain elevators filling, wind rippling the
stalks, birds bursting up, dust swirling everywhere, the men at work and at rest, and so on. I knew the dust-filtered light would approximate a whole film shot during Hollywood’s beloved “golden time” (that gorgeous, refracted light ahead of sunset), the action and machinery would be powerful, the contrasting peaceful moments equally compelling, and a judicious choice of music and natural sounds would enhance it all. And to add a welcome, unexpected touch, the soundtrack would replace pedantic narration with a selection of poems from Sund’s rich and graceful book *Bunch Grass*,

his multi-part account memorializing one such wheat harvest experienced firsthand.

Just the other day I bought a copy of Robert’s collected poems at last, and the whole scenario came sweeping back. I had written a solid treatment back then, and his poems enriched the text greatly; the King Screen bosses were interested and tried to make the sale. But no sponsoring company or television network (no PBS back then) or AID agency person would commit any financial backing, so the idea finally died.

In Robert’s memory now, I want to quote a few of his brief harvest poems, so calm and precise and easily absorbed, to convey a bit of what we had hoped to present to the world 40 years ago...

*Dark leaves lift in light wind.*
*At dawn, dew*
*slips away from hidden cloisters in the grass.*
*Near a bed of lupine*
*the meadowlark sees his shadow*
*wakening beside him.*
*There,*
*among the lavender blue spires*
*balanced*
*surely upon the light blossom of wonder,*
*he tries to remember*
*but can recall*
*only part of a song he must have once*
*known fully,*
*and he sings again....*

*First there is silence; then,*
*farther on,*
*at the edge of a field,*
*the riddled song of a cricket. Beyond that,*
*silence.*
*And still beyond, barely audible,*
*the hum of a combine*
*going uphill through rows of wheat.*
*No wind at all.*
*The sky is a sailboat,*
*scarcely moving....*
America is a strange man
lying in a wheat field.
Combines
are coming in the distance,
gearing down
to take the hill.
Nothing
will stop them.
Working fourteen hours a day,
three weeks now
without a day's rest, the combine men
are tired, and praying
for rain.
Lying in the wheat,
the strange man
turns over on his side.
In his hand
a clod of dirt
crumbles....

Just outside the elevator
in the hot sun,
you hear
the slow lament of flies.

Listening closely,
you hear also,
just under them--
it might be miles away--
the wind,
soft,
and steady.
It's lunchtime in the fields.
Combines are cooling off....

Afternoon,
with just enough of a breeze for him to ride it
lazily, a hawk
sails stiff-winged
up the slope of a stubble-covered hill,
so low
he nearly
touches his shadow....

Let these poems be like bunch grass,
in ground winds,
flash floods, and sunlight,
holding together
while one cricket sheltered here
sings his single song....

Sharp lines
soften in the reflected light
as the sun falls lower and lower.
Shadows
slowly lift the fields.
Coming from somewhere unseen,
a barn swallow shoots up into the bright sky,
dips down into
the shadows, sweeps
back up,
brilliant and sunlit,
designing
in an old, unformulated language
the single word for
joy.

My compressed edit can’t convey the complexity and simplicity and beauty of Robert’s 54 individual harvest poems, nor the rich, golden-time visuals awaiting some camera somewhere in wheat country, from vast fields rippling in the wind, to clattering-machine excitement, to dust-streaked elevator workers collapsed in exhaustion at sunset, to the bird-haunted onset of night, with all the big machines poised for a new day. But perhaps even this much suggests what we had hoped and what some filmmaker still could achieve.

(Both photos of Sund are the work of photographer Mary Randlett.)