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REVIEWS

Among the Dog Eaters. By Adrian C. Louis. Albuquerque: West End Press, 1992. 90 pages. \$9.95 paper.

The odyssey of *Among the Dog Eaters* really begins with Adrian Louis's previous book *Fire Water World*. The two books of lyric poetry trace the narrator's journey through Indian country to the Pine Ridge Sioux reservation, and finally to Rushville, Nebraska. The books also follow the narrator's struggle against alcohol and his gradual extrication from addiction. The poems in both books are grisly tales of poverty, prejudice, and violence—and the humor needed to survive the "fire water world" and a tough Sioux reservation.

Louis teaches at Oglala Lakota College on the Pine Ridge Reservation, although he is a member of the Lovelock Paiute tribe. He describes his hosts by what they eat: "Indians of other tribes refer to the Sioux as 'Dog Eaters,' with good humor." He lives among the "Dog Eaters" and so finds himself, as a non-Sioux, an outsider and, as a Native American, an insider. This marginalized life within another nation has similarities to his uneasy coexistence with European-American culture, whose literary traditions provide one source of his writing. At Oglala Lakota College he teaches English, which he calls, after Sherman Alexie, "the language of the enemy" (p. 64). He is not truly at home in any tradition, and this tension generates the mode of Louis's writings.

The language itself—a mix of Indian slang, Lakota, street language, and academic discourse—embodies conflict. The vocabu-

lary is potentially offensive to almost everybody, with explicit references to masturbation, ejaculation, and human genitals. Louis sometimes depicts women as complex people, or he reduces them to anatomy parts, as in "your lovely Assiniboine ass" (p. 21). Racial references are "redskins," "half breeds," "squaw man," and "rednecks." People at a Mister Donut store in Rapid City are "assorted cretins at the counter" (p. 61), and specific slurs include a reference to Sioux writer Vine Deloria as "Vinyl Deloria" (p. 36). Louis's poetry is not for the genteel reader; it calls to mind the warning William Carlos Williams wrote in his introduction to Allen Ginsberg's poem "Howl": "Hold back the edges of your gowns, Ladies, we are going through hell."

The half-smile in the voice of the narrator saves him from sounding like an irredeemable misanthropist. Ironic humor is the backdrop for the entire book, a survival strategy that softens the blows. Another saving grace is the fact that the speaker makes fun of himself more than anyone else. Especially poignant are his failures due to alcohol, as in the poem "The Sweatlodge":

Dancing lights of green and red
shot from my eyes and I sighed
when the flap was finally opened.

A week later I was at the Oasis Bar
in Rapid City drinking with Verdell
and countless forlorn urban skins . . . (p. 28).

He glosses over the lapse with straight-faced humor and by juxtaposing the Latin-based *urban* and the slang *skins*. In "Degrees of Hydrophobia," the writer describes himself: "I am the untrainable dog that bites/all he sees and stains all the rugs of the world" (p. 64). Self-deprecating humor positions Louis within his world of skins, breeds, rednecks, and cretins. It is part of his metaphysics, as he explains in the final poem, "The true terror of life is that humor/is a tumor and like cancer is part and parcel of the whole" ("Small Town Noise," p. 84). Among mixed blessings, humor does make the "true terror of life" bearable.

Painful, raw words fit with the painful content of Louis's poetry, especially the poems that recount heart-breaking histories. "Christmas Carol for the Severed Head of Mangas Coloradas" is a stunning poem, where the epithet "stink butt redneck soldiers" fits with their deeds of torturing an Apache chief who came to talk peace. Not content with torture and murder, the whites mutilate

the corpse for science: "[A]n Army surgeon removed/his savage brain and measured it somehow" (p. 14). Surgeons find it is the same weight as the brain of Daniel Webster, and Louis weaves together this fact with his purchase of a dictionary. Waiting in line to pay, he is harassed by boys who show the same animosity as the soldiers who killed Mangas Coloradas. The past penetrates the present, as a more subtle war of prejudice continues against Native Americans. Strong language is justified.

Historic perspective is also important to understanding contemporary life on the Pine Ridge Reservation. A haunting poem is "Tears of One Hundred Years: Wounded Knee, South Dakota, 1890–1990" (p. 50). Louis begins with a quotation from Chief American Horse, a witness to the Wounded Knee atrocities. He focuses on the final act of cruelty: "Little boys who were not wounded came out of their places of refuge and as soon as they came in sight, a number of soldiers surrounded them and butchered them right there" (p. 50). Louis draws a comparison between these boys physically "butchered" and the "young drunks burning/black/rubber/on black asphalt" (p. 50), whose spirits have been butchered, despite "Lord Christ of the white church down the road."

The historic poems of *Among the Dog Eaters* give perspective to contemporary reservation life, especially hellish scenes of alcoholism. Painful descriptions of drunks, such as those cashing welfare checks for booze ("Sunset at Pine Ridge Agency"), have antecedents in the pain of the Indian Wars. The narrator's own struggle with alcohol, referred to in many poems, gains urgency beyond his own life. It comes to represent the struggle of a people, as he tries to stay off the "death road" to White Clay, Nebraska, where liquor is legal, and turn to "the red road toward/the rest of my life" ("Burning Trash One Sober Night," p. 38).

Many of the poems, especially in the first half of the book, are similar in form and content to those of *Fire Water World*, but new to the pantheon of characters are Verdell and a new T-Bird automobile. Both are trusted friends. Verdell tells his own stories of lust and martinis in "Verdell Reports on His Trip" (p. 36) and is there to relate another hyperbolic love story when the narrator moves to Nebraska ("Breakfast at Big Bat's Conoco Convenience Store in Pine Ridge," pp. 77–84). Verdell, as well as the "old lady" of several poems, anchor the narrator with their ties of companionship. The new T-Bird, too, is a companion as well as a mechanical contraption. The narrator lays rubber in it to be sexy, in "Dust

World" (p. 17), and he drives it to escape the boredom of the reservation in "A Funeral Procession of One" (p. 60). When he needs courage, he sees that "across the street the fog is afraid/of my brand new T-Bird" (p. 33), and when the car gets a flat tire ten miles out of town, amidst coyotes, both the narrator and the car hobble home on three wheels ("Coyote Night," p. 58). These characters add continuity to the book and expand the poetic monologues with fresh blood—and oil.

Several poems are about Wovoka, the Paiute who originated the Ghost Dance religion, and the history of the Ghost Dance on the Sioux reservation. Louis, unwittingly, is an ironic, contemporary Wovoka, come to save Lakota students from run-on sentences, if nothing else. He laughs at himself and everyone around him in this strong, angry, and sometimes loving book. He reaches out in poetry filled with adjectives and invectives in order to reconcile himself to his world, situated among "Dog Eaters" at Pine Ridge and the rednecks of Nebraska:

I have no answers and will fight no more.
My life has been spent in cultural dyslexia.
My years are soaked in historical aphasia.
Being a halfbreed is the world's hardest job.
Being sober helps a bit, but I still love
to whine, yes I do.
("Breakfast at Big Bat's Conoco Convenience Store," p.78)

Despite his protests and "whines," this could be the voice of a survivor, a new hero for these uneasy times.

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Canada's First Nations: A History of Founding Peoples from Earliest Times. By Olive Patricia Dickason. Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1992. 590 pages. \$39.95 cloth; \$24.95 paper.

Since their inception, courses in Native American history and politics, whether they are offered in traditional history departments or in the more recently created native studies programs in Canadian universities, have suffered from the lack of comprehensive published studies of the history of aboriginal peoples in