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Answering the Deer

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In the ancient bardic tradition the bards sang only of love and death. Certainly these twin themes encompass the whole of human experience. Loving, celebrating, and joining are the source of life, but they necessarily occur against a background of potential extinction. Thus, these themes become the spindle and loom of the poets' weavings, for our most significant understandings of ourselves, our fellow creatures, and our tradition, our past, come from the interplay of connection and disconnection. The American Indian women who write poetry write in that ancient tradition; for like the bards, we are tribal singers. And because our tribal present is inextricably bound to our continuing awareness of imminent genocide, our approach to these themes, love and death, takes on a pervasive sense of sorrow and anger that is not easily reconciled with the equally powerful tradition of celebrating with the past and affirming the future that is the essence of the oral tradition.

We are the dead and the witnesses to death of hundreds of thousands of our people, of the water, the air, the animals and forests and grassy lands that sustained them and us not so very long ago.

We are the people who have no shape or form, whose invisibility is not visual only but of the voice as well; we can speak, but we are not heard. As Laguna poet and writer Leslie Marmon Silko writes in *Ceremony*, "(We) can't talk to you. (We are) invisible. (Our) words are formed with an invisible tongue, they have no sound."¹

"Blessed are they who listen when no one is left to speak"² Chickasaw poet Linda Hogan writes in her poem "Blessing." The impact of genocide in the minds of American Indian poets and writers cannot be exaggerated. It is an all-pervasive feature

of the consciousness of every American Indian in the United States, and the poets are never unaware of it. Even poems that are meant to be humorous get much of their humor directly from this awareness. American Indians take the fact of probable extinction for granted in every thought, in every conversation. We have become so accustomed to the immediate likelihood of racial extinction in the centuries since Anglo-European invasion, that it can be alluded to in many indirect ways; its pervasive presence creates a sense of sorrow in even the funniest of tales.

Mary Randle TallMountain, Athabascan poet born in the Koyukon village of Nulato, writes of witnessing with a wolf companion in her poem "The Last Wolf." In the poem the speaker is lying in a hospital in a devastated San Francisco, waiting for the last wolf to make his way to her through the "ruined city." She hears "his baying echoes/ down the steep smashed warrens/ of Montgomery Street / . . . and at last his low whine as he came / . . . to the room where I sat /

I watched
he trotted across the floor
he laid his long gray muzzle
on the spare white spread
and his eyes burned yellow
his dotted eyebrows quivered.

Yes, I said.
I know what they have done.³

The question that the writers face again and again, pose in a multitude of ways, and answer in a multitude of ways, is this: how does one survive in the face of collective death? Bearing witness is one of the solutions, but it is a solution that is singularly tearing, for witnessing to genocide—as to conversion—requires that there be those who listen and comprehend.

The American Indian poet is singularly bereft of listeners. The Indian people don't buy a great deal of modern poetry or novels; they are very busy trying to preserve the elements of culture and tribal identity that are left them, while accommodating these to the larger American society around them. But audiences for the American Indian writer drawn from the ranks of other Americans are sparse because of the many large and trivial differences in assumptions, expectations, experiences and symbol-

structures between Indian and non-Indian. The American Indian writer has difficulty locating readers/listeners who can comprehend the significance of her work, even when she is being as clear and direct as she can be, because these differences in experience and meaning assigned to events create an almost impossible barrier.

What we bear witness to is not easily admissible into the consciousness of other Americans, and that inadmissibility leads us to a difficulty in articulation and utterance signified by Hogan's plaint and by these lines from "I expected my skin and my blood to ripen" by Hopi-Miwok poet Wendy Rose:

"I expected my skin and my blood
to ripen
not to be ripped from my bones;
like green fruit I am peeled
tasted, discarded; my seeds are stepped on
and crushed
as if there were no future. Now
there has been
no past.
My own body gave up the beads,
my own hands gave the babies away
to be strung on bayonets . . .
as if the pain of their birthing
had never been."

Perhaps the knowledge of the real possibility of total extinction spurs one to perceptions that transcend the usual political, sociological, psychological or aesthetic responses to pain or rage. Certainly the knowledge of continuance is difficult to cling to. We cling to it nevertheless; for as Rose writes in the end of the poem excerpted above, the speaker would have protected the baby,

if I could, would've turned her
into a bush or rock if there'd been magic enough
to work such changes. Not enough magic
to stop the bullets, not enough
magic to stop the scientists, not enough magic
to stop the money. Now our ghosts dance
a new dance, pushing from their hearts
a new song.⁴

The new song our ghosts push from their hearts is a song of bitterness and grief, to be sure; but it is also a song of sanity, balance and humor.

Humor is a widely used means of dealing with life among Indians. Indian gatherings are marked by laughter and jokes, many of which are directed at the horrors of history, at the continuing impact of colonization, and at the biting knowledge living as an exile in one's own land necessitates. Thus, Leslie Marmon Silko recounts Coyote tales that are updated to reflect modern life at the pueblo of Laguna, an eastern Pueblo that is a cross-roads of southwestern Anglo, Chicano and Indian cultures:

III

Some white men came to Acoma and Laguna a hundred
years ago
and they fought over Acoma land and Laguna women
and
even now
some of their descendants are howling in
the hills southeast of Laguna.⁵

This short story tells the tale that what is important at Acoma is land, and at Laguna is women (said to be some of the most attractive women around) and that mixed bloods are likely to be howling around in the hills because they are the offspring of the wily and salacious Coyote. Indeed, "coyote" in much of Hispanic-America refers to half-breed,* which Silko alludes to in this poetic joke.

Coyote is a tricky personage—half creator, half fool; he (or she in some versions) is renowned for greediness and salaciousness. Coyote tales abound all over Native America, and he has been taken up by contemporary American Indian poets as a metaphor for all the foolishness and the anger consequent upon it that have characterized American Indian life in the last centuries. He is also a metaphor for continuance—for Coyote survives and a large part of his bag of survival tricks is his irreverence for all that over-righteous folk take too seriously. Because

* Edward Dozier, in *The Pueblo Indians of North America*, states that a "coyote" is an Indian "half-breed" whose father is Indian, not Hispanic (or Anglo), when referred to by Hispanics of the American Southwest [Ed.].

of this irreverance for everything—sex, family bonding, sacred things, even life itself—Coyote survives. He survives partly out of luck, partly out of cunning and partly because Coyote has, beneath a scabby coat, such great creative prowess that many tribes have characterized Coyote as the creator of this particular phase of existence, this “fifth world.” Certainly this time-frame has much that is shabby and tricky to offer; and much that needs to be treated with laughter and ironic humor; it is this spirit of the trickster-creator that keeps Indians alive and vital in the face of horror.

This stance, one of bitter irony, characterizes the poetry of Crow Creek Sioux poet, Elizabeth Cook-Lynn, as this excerpt from her poem “Contradiction” indicates:

She hears the wolves at night
prophetically. Put them behind,
the legends we have found,
care not a bit,
go make a night of it! . . .
She wonders why you dress your eyes
in pulsing shades of Muscatel,
while wailing songs of what-the-hell
make essences to eulogize. . .⁶

One might well wonder, even though the truth of it is known. When the traditions that inform the people with life, and inform that life with significance, are put behind, not much but Muscatel and “songs of what-the-hell” are left. Aside from the obvious emotional, social and psychological considerations implied in this observation, the interesting thing about the use of humor in American Indian poetry is its integrating effect: it makes tolerable what is otherwise unthinkable; it allows a sort of “breathing space” in which an entire race can take stock of itself and its future. Humor is a primary means of reconciling the tradition of continuance, bonding and celebration with the stark facts of racial destruction, and it is used in that way by many Indian poets, as in Nila NorthSun’s poem “moving camp too far:”

i can't speak of
 many moons
 moving camp on travois
i can't tell of
 the last great battle
 counting coup or
 taking scalps
i don't know what it
 was to hunt buffalo
 or do the ghost dance
but
i can see an eagle
 almost extinct
 on slurpee plastic cups
i can travel to powwows
 in campers & winnebagos
i can eat buffalo meat
 at the tourist burger stand
i can dance to indian music
 rock-n-roll hey-a-hey-o
i can
 & unfortunately
 i do.⁷

Surely this poem is a mourning song, as it is one of a stunted and trivialized vision made to fit a pop-culture conception of Indian, earth and extinction; certainly it highlights some of the more enraging aspects of American culture as they can only appear to an American Indian: a Winnebago is a tribe that lives in Iowa—that is what the word refers to among Indians; but among non-Indians it is a recreation vehicle—aptly enough. And an eagle is a symbol of the spirit, of vision, of transcendence to many American Indian traditions, but it is also an emblem that bedecks a plastic cup which sugary colored ice is served in. And buffalo signified an entire culture, a way of life for numerous tribes once upon a time—though it now is a consumer curiosity one can purchase at some tourist foodstand.

Many of the poems written by American Indian women address the stark fact of extinction directly, and they do so with a vigor and resilience that does not merely bewail a brutal fate but directs our attention to a kind of hope born of facing and facing down the brutal and bitter facts of our recent history and present

not only reflect the dual perceptions of Indian/non-Indian but that will reconcile them. The ideal metaphor will harmonize the contradictions and balance them so that internal equilibrium can be achieved, so that each perspective is meaningful and, in their joining, psychic unity rather than fragmentation occurs.

Fortunately modern life like modern poetry provides various means of making the dichotomy clear and of reconciling the contradictions within it. Airports, traveling, powwows, burger stands, recreation vehicles and advertising layouts all provide ways to enter the contradictions and resolve them. The increasingly common images derived from the more arcane aspects of Western traditions, alchemy, post-industrial science, electronic technology and the little-changing chores of housework and wifery provide images that are common denominators in the experiences of Indian and non-Indian alike, making unitary perception and interpretation at last possible. The poetry of Oneida (Wisconsin) poet Roberta Hill exemplifies this reconciliation, as in this fragment from "Leap in the Dark:"

—Then she sealed her nimble dreams
with water from a murky bay. "For him I map
this galaxy of dust that turns without an answer.
When it rains, I remember his face in the corridor
of a past apartment and trace the anguish around his
mouth,

. . . With the grace that remains
I catch a glint around a door I cannot enter.
The clock echoes in dishtowels; I search love's center
and bang pans against the rubble of my day, the lucid
grandeur of wet ground, the strangeness of a fatal sun
that makes us mark on the margin of our loss,
trust in the gossamer of touch, trust in the late-plowed
field.
I hug my death, my chorus of years, and search
and stretch and leap, for I will be apprentice to the
blood
in spite of the mood of the world
that keeps rusting, rusting, the wild throats of birds."⁹

Transformation, or, more directly, metamorphosis, is the oldest tribal ceremonial theme, one common to ancient Europe, Britain and America. And it comes once again into use within

the American Indian poetry of extinction and regeneration that is ultimately the only poetry a contemporary Indian woman can write. Poets who have located a means of negotiating the perilous path between love and death, between bonding and dissolution, between tribal consciousness and modern alienation must light on the transformational metaphor to articulate their experience. Or as Hill in the same poem writes:

. . . Oh crazy itch that grabs us beyond loss
and let us forgive, so that we can answer birds and
deer,
lightning and rain, shadow and hurricane
Truth waits in the creek, cutting the winter brown
hills:
it sings of its needles of ice, sings because of the scars.¹⁰

And, in a recent poem, "Morning: The World in the Lake," Linda Hogan uses the metaphor of transformation to celebrate the duration and persistence that are the basic characteristics of continuance and of love:

Beneath each black duck
another swims
shadow
joined to blood and flesh.
There's a world beneath this one.
The red-winged blackbird calls
its silent comrade below. . .

And then it rises, the blackbird
above the world's geography of light and dark
and we are there, living
in that revealed sliver of red
lining in the black
something of feathers,
daughters all of us,
who would sleep as if reflected
alongside our mothers,
the mothers of angels and shadows,
the helix and spiral of centuries
twisting inside.
Oh the radiant ones are burning
beneath this world.
They rise up,
the quenching water.¹¹

Reconciling the opposites of life and death, of celebration and grief, of laughter and rage is no simple task, yet it is one worthy of our best understanding and our best effort. If, in all these centuries of death we have continued to endure, we must celebrate that fact and the fact of our vitality in the face of what seemed, to many, inevitable extinction. For however painful and futile our struggle to continue becomes, we have but to look outside at the birds, the deer and the seasons to understand that change does not mean destruction, that life, however painful and even elusive it is at times, contains much of joy and hilarity, pleasure and beauty for those who live within its requirements with grace. Recently I've been working on a series of poems about assimilation and colonization—laying these against arcane and land-centered understandings, trying to articulate the balance between despairing reality and the hope that continued existence requires, as in these lines from "Transformations:"

Out in the light or sitting alone,
sorting, straightening tangled skeins
(they're always tying lives in knots)
I would like to be sleeping. Not
dreaming, just blacked out:
no one bumping around in my brain—
no tangles, no deaths, just quiet
empty nests, just threads
lying straight and ordered and still.
Outside the window I can see
sweet winter birds
rise up from tall weeds
chattering. They fly
into sunrised sky that holds them
in light.¹²

It seems the information and the patterns for continuance are all around us, if we will accept them for what they can signify, and use them to lend vitality and form to our lives. Certainly in the long ago that's what they did, and it's what we can do now as well.

NOTES

1. Leslie Marmon Silko, *Ceremony* (New York: Viking Press, 1977) p. 15.
2. Linda Hogan, "Blessings," in *Calling Myself Home* (New York: Greenfield Review Press, 1978) p. 27. Also in *The Remembered Earth*, edited by Geary Hobson (Albuquerque: Red Earth Press, 1979; reissued by The University of New Mexico, 1981) p. 55.
3. Mary TallMountain, "The Last Wolf," in *There Is No Word for Goodbye* (Marvin, S D.: Blue Cloud Quarterly, 1981) p. 15.
4. Wendy Rose, "I Expected My Skin To Ripen," in *Lost Copper* (Morongo Indian Reservation, Banning, California: Malki Museum Press, 1980) p. 219.
5. Silko, "Toe'osh: A Laguna Coyote Story," in *Storyteller* (New York: Viking Press, Seaver Books, 1981) p. 237. Also in *The Third Woman: Minority Women Writers of the United States*, edited by Dexter Fisher (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin Co., 1980) p. 94. Also in *A*, vol. 3, no. 2 (1977).
6. Elizabeth Cook-Lynn, *Then Badger Said This* (New York: Vantage Press, 1977), p. 12. Also in Fisher, p. 104.
7. Nila NorthSun, *First Skin Around Me*, edited by James L. White, (Territorial Press, 1976), also in Hobson, p. 380.
8. Joy Harjo, "3 AM," in *The Last Song* (Las Cruces, NM: Puerto del Sol Press, 1975) and *What Moon Drove Me To This* (Berkely: Reed and Cannon, 1979) p. 43. Also in Hobson, p. 109.
9. Roberta Hill, "Leap in the Dark," in Fisher, pp. 123-24.
10. Hill, in Fisher, pp. 123-24.
11. Linda Hogan, "Morning: The World in the Lake," in manuscript.
12. Paula Gunn Allen, from "Transformations," revised version in manuscript; original in *Starchild* (Marvin, SD: Blue Cloud Quarterly, 1981).

