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Review Essay

A Contemporary Tribe of Poets

Kenneth Lincoln

I weave the night, I cross the weft with stars
and the dark hollows of your eyes;
I plait the words you've said into my hair.

—Anita Endrezze Probst

Astounding: less than twenty years ago, there were no acknowledged, much less published, Native American "poets" in America. Exceptions proved the rule: John Rollin Ridge, Mourning Dove, Will Rogers, Charles Eastman, Luther Standing Bear. The historian, Stanley Vestal, argued that Sitting Bull was a poet in a native epic sense, but the Wild West still framed Buffalo Bill's "American" Indian. Indian literature fell under the pall of ethnological field work. Poor translations perpetuated the stereotype of the unlettered savage, and tribal anonymity shawled any personal sense of craft. Reliving Hiawatha in the nineteenth century, George Copway acculturated as the White man's Ojibwa visionary and died of alcoholism. Until the present generation of post-war Indian writers, who publish in English as a first language, native singers, tellers, and seers were effectively segregated from American literature.

The new Indian poets are children of the old ways, students of historical transitions, teachers of contemporary survivals. In the last two decades seminal writing has come from young Native Americans emerging from tribal settings, going to American schools and studying formal literatures, then going back to their own people to write personal versions of native experience. Add "woman" to "man" to "native" American, since these poets, many from matrilineal cultures, are equally gendered. Concentrate, sever, and migrate family histories from country toward city; recombine racial lines, mix cultures, and relocate tribes on

the edges of city limits. Voice the truths of pain and love, loss and survival among indigenous peoples. Politicize the poet's sensitivity over centuries of historical dispossession. Break into the caucus of the printed word, through labels of "savage," "heathen," "pagan," and "primitive."

There is no codified discipline to approach these materials in their cultural diversities. With the assorted "systematic" approaches to the structures of literature, one scheme seems as clever as another, and one cancels out another. It would seem that methodology needs to be interdisciplinary: collating literature, folklore, history, religion, handcraft, and the expressive arts. In such a field there is no more sophisticated or intricate apparatus than the cross-referenced mind, informed with the proper homework, freshly engaging multiple texts, asking variable questions, feeling for insights, hazarding perceptions.

I

The resurgence of "native" American consciousness in the 1960s hatched newly revised anthologies of old folkloric caches, John Bierhorst's *In the Trail of the Wind* (1971), William Brandon's *The Magic World* (1971), and Jerome Rothenberg's *Shaking the Pumpkin* (1972). These reworkings stirred old translation controversies.[1] Then Shirley Hill Witt, an Iroquois anthropologist, and Stan Steiner, popularist of ethnic rights, published *The Way: An Anthology of American Indian Literature* (1971) with a sprinkling of Ray Young Bear, Simon Ortiz, and James Welch, among a few selected others. More a cultural casebook, the anthology began with the powerful oratory of past tribal leaders, but soon bogged down in contemporary politics and the sociological jargon of the new movement.

The next year Natachee Scott Momaday (the novelist's mother) released *American Indian Authors*, an adolescent reader surveying Chief Joseph to Vine Deloria in 150 pages. So, too, in 1972 Terry Allen's *The Whispering Wind: Poetry by Young American Indians* debuted 128 pages of verse from the Institute of American Indian Arts. Most of these fourteen young poets were known as well, or better, as painters, sculptors, weavers, potters, dancers, or actors, reflecting the integrated arts of tribal cultures. A representative young voice, Liz Sohappy felt like "a floating body" until receiving her Palouse name, Om-na-ma, at the age of twenty-one in 1969. "My grandmother said that is how it was

to be—no one is here on earth until he has an Indian name." And these Indian poems marked the beginnings of artists learning tribal names, new tongues, adopted forms.

In 1973 Thomas Sanders and Walter Peek produced *Literature of the American Indian*, reprinting traditional materials (origin myths, song-poems, speeches) from Bureau of American Ethnology Reports and older anthologies such as George W. Cronyn's *The Path on the Rainbow* (1918), Margot Astrov's *The Winged Serpent* (1946), and A. Grove Day's *The Sky Clears* (1964). These selections, traditional as they stood, bore the archaic ring of talk-poetry; almost an afterthought, the collection appended a swatch of Ortiz, Welch, Russell, Momaday, and Emerson Blackhorse Mitchell as living Indian writers. The same year, Frederick Turner published *The Portable North American Indian Reader*, rich in historical, anthropological, and ethnological records. Turner's introduction forwarded close-to-the-bone arguments against stereotyping, with an insistence that readers read to understand the history of Indian literature, not proselytize about it. But again, a few recent Indian authors only tagged the collection.

Walter Lowenfels's *From the Belly of the Shark: Poems by Chicanos, Eskimos, Hawaiians, Indians, Puerto Ricans in the U.S.A., with Related Poems by Others* (1973) attempted to crack the "White Poetry Syndicate" with ethnic proclamations. Yet the amassed single poems came off, too often, more as political cant than poetry; and Lowenfels's charge against America's "genocidal attack on people of color" was inadvertently reflected in *more* total pages of "related poems by others" than work by contemporary Indians. Leslie Silko's "Old-time Indian Attack" on imitators of Native American poetry may have been seeded by such underrepresentation. Silko warned those culture-hopping writers, who assumed the "universal consciousness" to express the "Indian mind," that in the long run "translations," cultural borrowings, and liberal guilt signify "stolen property."[2] Eagle Wing spoke to his people in 1881, "We have been guilty of only one sin—we have had possessions that the white man coveted."

Later and from the other side, Adrienne Rich asked in "8/1/68": "And you, Custer, the Squaw-killer, hero of primitive schoolrooms—where are you buried, what is the condition of your bones?" Michael Rumaker protested from the bloody loam of his tormented "Poem:" "Indians, stop interrupting my dreams—Let me sleep the white death." Indian placenames for mountains, lakes, rivers, streams, streets, and cities no longer

echoed their tribal referents, as the intruding culture fell deaf to original tongues. Dead campfires, fading petroglyphs, unraveling wampums, and weathered feathers left mute testimony to America's losses. The American renegade need to get out of self and a dubious history drew empathetic poets, from Thoreau and Longfellow to Merwin and Snyder, stirred by their own homelessness, to displaced native peoples.

Blanketless
I stand exposed, alone, outside,
to think: Fine old traditions
don't come cheap these days:
And go.

John Milton lived in the Dakotas long enough to know "El Turista en El Pueblo," whatever corner of Indian country.

Out of this cultural miasma Dick Lourie sardonically elected to place "the Indian on the moon:"

we are awarding them
the whole moon: they will rebuild their ancient
cultures in the gray dust we will look up
to see the thousands of indians as
a spot on the luminous bright disc we
have loved in the sky:

And why all these dream-words from would-be Indians? The myths and realities of America's freedoms were bound up in Indian culture and history: "free speech" in Native American oratory, freedom of movement in Native American migrations, freedom of definition within the thousands of years of Native American cultural tenure, freedom of religious expression protesting institutionalization, free verse in the non-rhymed Native American chants metered to the subject sung, and freedom of space in the "wilds," the "plains," the mystic forests, the forbidding mountains and impassable deserts, where Native Americans lived of their own volition, attuned with who and where they were, not wild, but rooted in exacting senses of place. Native peoples lived at home in the American frontier. The pilgrims, homesteaders, pioneers, ranchers, city-builders, and now the poets watched at a distance in awe, fear, and envy.

II

Come to Power: Eleven Contemporary American Indian Poets (1974) first gathered Indian artists who realized "the timbre of the con-

nections," in the words of Simon Ortiz from Acoma Pueblo. Gracefully selected and edited by Dick Lourie, these 127 pages set up an entry to modern Indian poetry, as represented by Ray Young Bear, Norman Russell, Joseph Bruchac, Leslie Silko, and Duane Niatum, among the more well known. "They are out there," Bruchac introduced the collection, "they are speaking and they are being heard." This sampling was only a beginning. "For me, at least, a good anthology is always a reminder of how much more there is in store, like picking one berry at the edge of the woods and knowing from its taste that a whole summer full of berries is ahead."

Suzan Shown opened, "i breathe as the night breathes," and a new sense of color dawned in White America: "my heart's song is to the night." The beauties, moralities, and definitions of darkness were refracted in colors of night, a spectrum dispersed among darker 'Skins.'

Joseph Bruchac spoke of giving back something, altogether different from art for art's sake, as the angel touched an artist's shoulder and the typewriter began "speaking in tongues." These reciprocal values have always characterized Indian cultures: give-away-and-receive. "I seek to make my life and my poems a part of the whole," Bruchac explained, "taking nothing without returning something in kind which will make the balance good." Duane Niatum found that such poetry meant to "live with mud on your shoes, ride out the flights of white owl in your sleep." He recalled the words of Andrew Joe, a Skagit in Washington: "when we can understand animals, we will know the change is halfway. When we can talk to the forest, we will know that the change has come."

The changes were moving through Leslie Silko, "a mixed-breed Laguna Pueblo," who said she wrote "because I love the stories, the feelings, the words." This poet edged into the publishing world critterlike, grinning and skeptical, hassled and hassling back all the fuss. "But I keep trying it, like Coyote who keeps coming back for more—never quite learning his lesson." Trickster's contrary/wise fooling added twists to her tales. At heart Silko sang of the blended earth she wore as a mixed-blood.

> I am full of hunger
> deep and longing to touch
> wet tall grass, green and strong beneath.
> This woman loved a man
> and she breathed to him her damp earth
> song.

Gloria Levitas, Frank Vivelo, and Jacqueline Vivelo edited *American Indian Prose and Poetry: We Wait in the Darkness* (1974), cribbing Margot Astrov's revised anthology title. The volume offered the first significant cross-section of Native American poets now at work. Yet even here, with thirteen culture areas "Before," "After," and "Present" White occupancy, the contemporary poems seemed overly selective, one poem per poet, and the quality of these isolated pieces was uneven. The editors badgered the reader through samplings from past and present Indian history, asserting literature *as* literature, though all in all the texts fell short of literary consistency. The awkwardness and hyperbole of the movement, with a dash of older noble savagery, strained through patchy prefaces, fractious and often condescending.

In the same year came *Voices from Wah'Kon-Tah: Contemporary Poetry of Native Americans* (1974), culled from *Dacotah Territory, The Mustang Review, Pembroke Magazine, The Prairie Schooner, South Dakota Review*, and fully half from the Santa Fe Institute of American Indian Arts. Robert Dodge and Joseph McCullough sought to counter stereotypes through a casebook of thirty-five Native Americans who talked boldly in poets' voices. Vine Deloria's foreward saw these poets bridging "the gap between Chief Joseph and Russell Means," a "glorious past" dissolving into a "desperate present." Deloria characteristically struck to the core of things: a poet in "frightful solitude" could transcend chronology and take us down into the inner self, hence into Indian cultures, dreams, angers, despairs, and courages. These testimonies were not names and dates only, explanations after the facts of history, but languages of witness that most directly and deeply drew a reader close. These poets risked the personal voice. They trusted the heart's pain, the bitter dust of past and present betrayal. They struggled to fight back and resist, to define self and reality, to press for a better life. Arresting, challenging, complex and diverse: Native American experiences spoke here with an ear to tradition, an eye to now, a tongue to one's own heart in voices, plural, many-minded, human for a change, not watered down in social science.

> Coyote and this night
> be still.
> I wonder how a man can cling to life

Paula Allen ended her opening lament over the death of her Lakota grandfather. Charles Ballard followed, quietly sure:

But time was the trail went deep
Into a green and vibrant land.

Emerson Blackhorse Mitchell traveled "this vanishing old road" vision-questing "within the curved edge of quarter moon," as the poetry angled distinctly modern. David Martinez's "Song for Yellow Leaf Moon" lay surreal on the page:

Night blues as abstract as the ninth
day of yellow leaf moon—
the autumn season starts with September willows.
Life slows to a complicated new dusk—

American foreign and civil wars, roads and relocations, hard times and hardpan deserts, promises and reserves, a second language and a bullying big brother: in all this the poets could carve visions of themselves still Indian, roads and ways of words to choose, a language of their own thristing tongues. Fred Red Cloud told "A Tale of Last Stands" in Custer's Montana:

I sit with eyes like brown wounds
    and remember a yellow-haired laugh
in a place where
tumbleweeds blow.

Marnie Walsh walked reservations

Where disease like a serpent slips from house to house
And hunger sits in the dooryard

The deadly sins of poverty slipped through off-reservation towns run by "disgusted, busted whites," where "a slouching dwarf with rainwater eyes" administrated government offices, which James Welch saw in a nightmare of reality. Christian missionaries, advance men of Manifest Destiny, dredged for converts. Ray Young Bear could hear near "Empty Streams of Autumn,"

A bible opens then closes real hard
down the dirt road.

What Marnie Walsh's poems failed to say, what they stuttered out, numb in despair, tugged absently, mutely at America. "Emmet Kills-Warrior" of Turtle Mountain told of his mother:

in government hospital
she get their funeral too
my brother at their war

my sister in their jail
i come out to the prairie
sit on old rock

What Emmet had to say came in what he could not say.

well that what i got inside
that my story
the government can go shit

For "Vicki" at Fort Yates, No. Dak. 1970, a gap in consciousness told all: "saturday night whiskey night." Walsh registered an agony of voices speaking as they could, with no decoration, from open wounds, in the shock of pain. The poetry seeded a negative "style" that, in the twists of language and truth, created a new voice, naked and honest, true to people in their own places. A friend remembered "Bessie Dreaming Bear" of Rosebud, So. Dak. 1960:

we all went to town one day
went to a store
bought you new shoes
red high heels

aint seen you since

How could Indians learn again to listen "when the / rain falls and we do not hear," Ray Young Bear asked. Mother Earth answered in "The Listening Rock:"

earth heard them
talking to themselves
far away and always spoke
back: you are home.

These "voices" from *Wah'kon-tah* began to carry American Indian poets home, less than a decade ago, to America.

III

America

give me a color
to step in,
a color for my
table, a color to thrash

my hands in—
my inner swirls
are grey with yesterday's promises
becoming today's raining wail.

—Wendy Rose

Harper and Row initiated a Native American Series in 1972 with Hyemeyohsts Storm's *Seven Arrows*. The series picked up Welch's first poetry and fiction, and in 1975 published a fifth volume, Duane Niatum's *Carriers of the Dream Wheel: Contemporary Native American Poetry*. The anthology was boldly illustrated by Wendy Rose. Practicing artists, teachers, and students were brought together here as literate poets, college educated and published in scores of journals and chapbooks:

Jime Barnes	Choctaw	born Oklahoma 1933
N. Scott Momaday	Kiowa	born Oklahoma 1934
Duane Niatum	Klallam	born Washington 1938
James Welch	Blackfeet/ Gros Ventre	born Montana 1940
Simon Ortiz	Acoma	born New Mexico 1941
Joseph Bruchac	Abnaki	born New York 1942
Gladys Cardiff	Cherokee	born Montana 1942
Lance Henson	Cheyenne	born Oklahoma 1944
W. M. Ransom	Cheyenne/ Arapaho	born Washington 1945
Liz Bahe	Yakima	born Washington 1947
Roberta Hill	Oneida	born Wisconsin 1947
Wendy Rose	Hopi/Miwok	born California 1948
Leslie Silko	Laguna	born New Mexico 1948
Dana Naone	Hawaiian	born Oahu 1949
Ray Young Bear	Mesquaki	born Iowa 1950
Anita Probst	Yaqui	born California 1952

Taken as a whole, these diverse seven women and nine men were born in the middle of World War II; their average age was thirty-one years old when the collection came out.

> And they carry the wheel among the camps,
> Saying: Come, come,
> Let us tell the old stories,
> Let us sing the sacred songs.

So Momaday offered the anthology's title in "Carriers of the Dream Wheel." A new Indian image was emerging: the educated traditionalist. To know workable talents and put them to use, whether potter, hunter, poet, or lumberjack, was *not un*Indian, these cultural craftsmen argued, by example, against the American mainstream drop-out. Robert Hill challenged in "Dream of Rebirth:"

> We stand on the edge of wounds, hugging canned meat,
> waiting for owls to come grind
> nightsmell in our ears. . . .
> Groping within us are cries yet unheard.
> We are born with cobwebs in our mouths
> bleeding with prophecies.

No longer *a* poem to illustrate *an* author, but a serious and committed body of work coalesced here. These were not occasional acts of poetic insight, but life and work, true craft.

Going back to Oneida, Roberta Hill looked into "Night along the Mackinac Bridge:"

> What was once so distant
> breaks upon me now, while dark dark water crumbles the moon.

Wendy Rose went to touch her Hopi father, asking "who am I?" and pleading with her Miwok mother, "please believe in me."

> Pottery shards, splintered and dusty,
> glued together by that which is spirit
> —may it someday hold water—

Under a "snow-fat" Montana sky, James Welch ran with words, fugitive from Delphi. His whip-snaking, cross-rhymed verse defied White winter torpor through Indians "Surviving:"

> The day-long cold hard rain drove
> like sun through all the cedar sky
> we had that late fall. We huddled
> close as cows before the bellied stove.
> Told stories.

The poets honed a firm, lean language into stanzas with muscle. Hunters of themselves, they tracked with deft skill, the sure touch and go of symbolic attention. Gladys Cardiff saw her poems cut through the world: "My song scythes over wet fields." Roberta Hill looked back:

> I've grown lean walking along dirt roads,
> under a glassy sun, whispering to steps.
> Twenty years I've lived on ruin.

Hill's images flared over a prairie of severity and promise. "Bones flash like shells / in salt green grass," she obliquely recorded in 1973, occupying Wounded Knee. "How can I mark this sorrow?" Wendy Rose stood her ground at Alcatraz in 1969: "Neither leader nor fullblood / how and why me?" The feminist poems unsettled with terrible beauty. Anita Probst "thigh deep in pasture" warned, "I am gentle, but angry." This sorceress of bitter charms, night spells, and surreal images chanted in "Learning the Spells: A Diptych,"

> *I am the beast she never knew or wished. I grieve*
> *with lust: I will split her like the water's reeds.*
> *That damp-backed woman's spell runs, wounded.*
> *It hides, a coiled snake, under silken leaves.*
> *Betrayal flies quietly on dark wings.*

Anita Probst wrote in the shadow of Tezcatlipoca, the Aztec god whose name meant "smoking mirror" from the obsidian he saw by: lord of night and death, of sorcerers and warriors, of omens and terror. Such a god, the Aztecs said, reigned omnipotent and omnipresent, "like the darkness, like the mind."[3]

The traditional virtues in *Carriers of the Dream Wheel* still held, however tenuously, in a modern wasteland of imposed White values. The poets pushed back the nightmare, grounded the metaphor, sobered the vision-drunk questor, and called all home again to the family of the tribe. W. R. Ransom drilled a language of nights under figureless stars, waiting in "Critter:"

> Sat up all night and lugged at the moon.
> Grunted. Nothing changed.
> Sun rolled up the mountain.
> I could tell about
> meadowlarks, finches
> or dogwood and poplar,
> madronas, cedar—

no, it was Orion I waited for.

In upstate New York a mountain stream flowed on limpidly simple in Bruchac's "IV:"

I shall go there
and wade into those clear ripples
where the sandy bottom
is spread with stones
which look like the bones
of beautiful ancient animals
I shall spread my arms
in the sweet water
and go like a last wash of snow
down to the loon shadow
in the last days of April

Out west, Simon Ortiz instructed his children by way of "old water courses, in wind, / where your mother walked, where her mother walked." His story-poems brought back to life Coyote Old Man, the elders, the old ways, the new sorrows. Ray Young Bear found himself "Coming Back Home" to the touch of his grandfathers:

i pressed my fingers
against the window, leaving
five clear answers of the day
before it left, barking down the road.

In 1975 Kenneth Rosen edited *Voices of the Rainbow: Contemporary Poetry by American Indians* to complement his prose anthology, *The Man to Send Rain Clouds* (1974). R. C. Gorman illustrated the collection: a Navajo face, hand, foot, or an abstract line cast a woman's body, brushed with water color, in shadow negatives. By now, the poets had grown familiar in print, some new names, some on leave. Eleven of the twenty-one poets initiated fresh voices. Phil George asked, "amerika's-whiteman-life makes me sad. / Am I alone?" Peter Blue Cloud chanted death songs for "Wolf" and hawk, buffalo and grizzly, the hunted and tracked-down freedoms of the past:

a wind of running leaves across the prairie,
a scent of pine in frozen north the muskeg
    lakes
        lent footprints
    cast in sandstone
grains rubbing time the desert's constant edge.

The native country of America had receded farther back now, but still called through tribal voices. The meadowlark's nectared song reached Carter Revard's "notch of cement-bottomed sky" driving through Oklahoma. Oxford education led a Rhodes scholar all the way back to

> . . . a wilderness big enough
> to find a vision in
> while quite alone.

But this modern Indian poet had moved into academia, as his immigrant father was once "taking up the city and losing at cards." In the modern malaise, artists like John Berryman, "hunchvoiced henry," took their own lives, bearing the suicidal art of Hart Crane, Hemingway, Sylvia Plath, and Anne Sexton. So, too, Gerald Vizenor wrote of mixed-up mixed-bloods "hanging the wrong man / for raising the wrong flags." A passing Indian saluted with the wrong hand and committed suicide with young birds "on the wrong trees at dusk."

The women in *Voices of the Rainbow* pressed for existence beyond barren survivals: rebirth, rage, forgiveness. "Joy is tough like hide," Roberta Hill heard the frogs whisper from "Swamp." She asked the hunter in "Seal at Stinson Beach:"

> Teach me
> your crisscross answer
> to the cackling of gulls.

Hill's "Winter Burn" bore a vision of rebirth:

> Let clear winter burn away my eyes.
> Let this seed amaze the ground again.

Leslie Silko's "damp earth song" proferred no end to searching the old or new ways: "the struggle is ritual." Memory would spill into the world at all times, as she made ritual "Preparations:" "Let wind polish the bones."

IV

Joseph Bruchac (Abnaki) edited a second anthology in 1978, *The Next World: Poems by Third World Americans* who participated in 1970s workshops. "We are a nation of nations," Bruchac prefaced the poets, rising above American prejudice by making literature from it: "an era which is alive with exciting new poets, a new era in which voices which have been traditionally silent

(or silenced) are being heard." Tempered understandings replaced the invective of *From the Belly of the Shark* five years earlier.

Indian poets could share a world with America; Pan-Indians took a place among Third World movements against common oppressors. Karoniaktatie (Alex Jacobs, Mohawk) invented an up-beat language of get-down talk, a dialect away from Black mumbo-jumbo, Puerto Rican hip, and Chicano hustle:

> california
> gold rush
> what a rush
> u need Pit River
> to wipe LA's ass
> u need Alcatraz
> to make tourist bucks
> u need Maidu graves
> for Reagans mansion
> california
> dats not a tan
> dats my caked blood
>
> what a rush

This tongue on the streets spoke "English" with a twist, variations on medicine chants, war songs, and hip obliquities. Dialect and dialogue, jargon and slang fed into the crafts of poetry, chanting "America" from the slant of native histories. These were the voices of outsiders who would fist and knuckle their own insider's talk, deep within the dominant culture.

All along, Simon Ortiz listened to older Acoma men talk as they stood by mixing troughs to build Pueblo walls:

> . . . the men who keep up the traditions of our people, community, of our language. These are the people who insure that the language keeps being a way of *touching* among ourselves, the things we see and hear, the things that we all are enjoined with, those things around *all* of us.

Among "this cluster of tongues, this dark flying world / this trying-on of the whiteman's witchery," Wendy Rose saw herself a Hopi half-breed "between skins that think I'm too white, whites, that think I'm too Indian." She looked "for acceptance somewhere" and stood up in her poems, counting, crying openly,

asking the hard questions of herself split in America. Wendy Rose caught herself at the "Vanishing Point: Urban Indian," lamenting her cultural quest,

> It is I in the cities, in the bars, in the
> dustless reaches of cold eyes who vanishes, who leans
>
> underbalanced into nothing; it is I without learning
> I without song, who dies & cries the death time, who
> blows from place to place hanging onto dandelion dust,
> dying over & over.

Geary Hobson's *The Remembered Earth: An Anthology of Contemporary Native American Literature* (1979) mustered the broadest cross-section of living Indian writers today, 427 pages with 74 artists grouped by geographical kinship among tribes. What this literary powwow skitter-stepped in sustained technique, it compensated for bringing together talents, sentiments, causes, aspirations, and griefs, from reservation to off-reservation, urban to academic Indian. Elizabeth Cook-Lynn touched a common center in "The Bare Facts:"

> The spirit lives
> when it moves and sings your name
> when grandfather and coyote keep warm
> together, and lizard gets damp
> from the earth, stays fast and hard to kill,
> when lark flies straight and high to clouds
> and you hear the buzzard weeping under blankets,
> when butterfly still talks to women,
> when ants will fight and die to carry stones,
> seedlike and shiny, from mound to rattle,
> when we hang by fingernails, remote and hidden,
> at the ridge of words.

Many, many voices of varying media and maturity offered in *The Remembered Earth* not only poetry and prose as "literature," but a collation of tongues. The writing ranged from folk, to politic, to journalist, to poetic. Multiple forms among diverse perspectives reawakened the young Indians, gathering in clans among their elders. "It is renewal, it is continuance—and it is remembering," Hobson led into the gathering. Everywhere energies were breaking through these experimental forms, and they generated an American Indian renascence in print: idiomatic Indian voices from all parts of America, breed to blood,

prose essay, voice play, fiction, prose poem, novel-in-progress, free verse, rhymed and metered poetry.

Maurice Kenny defined the traditional art by way of cultural content, artistic intent, and tribal effect: "a touching, teaching, often practical, more often significantly religious, a gratefulness and, possibly, a warning." Witness the work of Peter Blue Cloud ("I too am Spring time" rattlesnake pleads), Carter Revard (winter-counting Uncle Gus's memorial feast), Barney Bush (leaning across pool tables and jukeboxes), or Larry Emerson (cornered drunk in Gallup). Joseph Bruchac sensed "The Remedies:"

> Half of the Earth, half of the heart,
> the remedies for all our pains
> wait for the songs of healing.

Native American women drew upon the courage of their waiting to ritualize personal sorrows. Paula Allen prayed in "Rain for Ke-waik Bu-ne-ya:"

> like the old ones we sat
> gathering fragments of long since broken hearts:
>
> bring tomorrow.

And tomorrow does come, speaking, singing, writing, as Momaday defined the Indian "Man Made of Words:" "Instinctively, and with great care, he deals in the most honest and basic way with words." Simon Ortiz insisted in a rage of forms—short story, poetry, reportage—that "The story of a People is the history of what they are doing. It is the story of their struggle to continue."

These writers touched their native earth to re*member* themselves Indian. "No one has ever left" *Okla-homa*, Joy Harjo believed, land of the "red earth people." And furthermore: "That which has happened to the earth, has happened to all of us as part of the earth." The "cinnamon colored soil" of Linda Hogan's Oklahoma so too grounded Duane Big Eagle's song of a land "as open as his shirt collar" in "My Father's Country." Whether southwest desert, Oklahoma dirt farm, Pacific coastal wood, southeast hill country, northeast lake region, or Great Northern plain, "We are the land," Paula Allen stated simply, directly. And Indian identity *is* the land, not pre-positionally "in" or "of" or "on," but *is*: "the Earth is the mind of the people as we are the mind of the earth. . . . that perfect peace of being together with all that surrounds one."

Momaday held that "an Indian is an idea which a given man has of himself," according to region and tribe, beyond bloodline and cultural stereotype. Geary Hobson accordingly, and in strapping tones, put Whites in their places coming to play Indian. He chastized the faddishness of shit-kicking White shamans, would-be "natives," some "the bastard children of Snyder." Less tendentiously, still with firmly informed lines of demarcation, Paula Allen's "The Sacred Hoop" argued native cultural views: "The great mythic and ceremonial cycles of the American Indian peoples are neither primitive in any meaningful sense of the term, nor are they necessarily the province of the folk; much of the material on the literature is known only to educated, specialized persons who are privy to the philosophical, mystical, and literary wealth of their own tribe." Wendy Rose carried the dream wheel another turn in her own life, chanting to "Some Few Hopi Ancestors:"

> No longer the drifting
> and falling of wind,
> your songs have changed.
> They have
> become thin willow whispers
> that take us by the ankle
> and tangle
> us up with the red mesa stone,
> that keep us turned
> toward a round sky,
> that follow us down
> to Winslow, to Sherman,
> to Oakland—to the ends
> of all the spokes
> that leave earth's middle.

V

Alan R. Velie's *American Indian Literature: An Anthology* (1979) rounded a decade of anthologies full circle, from tales, songs, memoirs, and oratory to poetry and fiction by the now known writers, Welch, Revard, Ortiz, Henson, Momaday, *et al.* (a disproportionate Oklahoman dose). Velie reprinted early century ethnology: Radin's Winnebago Trickster tales, Neihardt's retelling of Black Elk, Brinton's *Walum Olum* with the pictographs, Delaware oral narratives, and translations, and Densmore's eth-

nomusicology. The anthology included musical notation, in an effort to trace the translations back to their origins in song, ceremony, music, and dance (John Bierhorst also acknowledged the song-poem translations in *A Cry from the Earth*, the annotated record album accompanying his collection of traditional verse, *In the Trail of the Wind*). An assortment of contemporary "49" powwow social songs up-dated the older musicology. Velie's collection stood serviceable, generally informative, but not significantly new; it generally tended to popularize ceremonial Indian texts and patronize modern artists, as an intrusive editorial voice slipped into analogies with classics and popfamiliars: Shakespeare, the Bible, Greeks and Romans, TV and mainstream movies.

The Modern Language Association went tribal with some added twists. In 1980 Dexter Fisher published *The Third Woman: Minority Women Writers of the United States*. "Just as the nations of the third world are 'emerging' in the sense that the Euro-American world has 'discovered' them, so is 'the Third Woman' revealing herself to us, though she has always been present," Fisher began. If there were revolutionary depths in America, this double minority of voices (by circumstance of sex and racial class) constituted an articulate feminist majority.

The American Indian section of Fisher's anthology led off with detailed introductory notes, vivid writings, and a full bibliography. The collection was expertly edited and paced; the readings from eighteen women rang refreshing. Keepers of family, culture, tradition, and their own integrity, these twentieth-century Indian women remained alive to old ways and new. Leslie Silko asserted relationships, personal accessibility, coming to terms: "some kind of equilibrium with those people around you." Showing people "ways of seeing things" timelessly new, Silko spoke of her art organically: "There are these stories that just have to be told in the same way the wind goes blowing across the mesa." Elizabeth Sullivan looked back unflinching on the Creek Trail of Tears, Helen Sekaquaptewa told her Hopi life-story, Mourning Dove related Okanogan Coyote tales, and Kay Bennett retold the Navajo origin myth of earth mother or Changing Woman, "A Woman She Becomes Time and Again." Janet Campbell remembered the snowfall in her Coeur d'Alene childhood, and Opal Lee Popkes, a Choctaw with eleven unpublished novels, wrote of a bonsaied California Indian, Zuma Chowt, eating rats and surviving fifty years as a twentieth-century Ishi, stashed in a cave above a southern California beach.

These women poets stabbed at a history of racial oppression, cultural White arrogance, and male dominance. Wendy Rose, doctoral candidate in anthropology at UC Berkeley, found a 1977 catalogue in which "collectors" still sold "Plains Indian Art" looted from the Wounded Knee Massacre:

> I expected my skin and my blood
> to ripen
> not 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.

Southwest child, decadent child, artifact child, child-bearing child, incorrigible woman, the Navajo Nia Francisco sang out,

> call me dine asdzaani
> i am child of winter nights
>   growing in rhythm of summer thaw
> i am the one you will see walking before dawn
>   and dancing after raindew has dried

Anna Lee Walters (Pawnee/Otoe) still heard that "no color" jr. hi boy cawing "squaw, squaw, squaw." Marnie Walsh followed Vicki Loans-Arrow into a bar toilet, checking on her cousin, Charlene Lost-Nation, who could not kill herself in *The Blood of the Knife*:

> she looks at me
> and i see the knife
> sticking out between her teeth
> and remember what that means
> and i know shed like to die
> but cant
> so she killed her tongue
> instead

There were gentler moments in *The Third Woman*: Ramona Wilson's Colville grandmother washing her hair in willow water, Elizabeth Cook-Lynn hearing her Sioux grandmother tell stories, and Anita Endrezze-Danielson (formerly Probst) painting Yaqui "Still Life:"

Oranges sleep,
lazy alley cats, curled in the heat.
With my knife, I slap thick oil on apples:
red knees streaked with grass stains.
Dried paint clots my nails;

Pearls of oil cling to my hair.

Roberta Hill heard the Oneida "music of the voice that speaks through me," enough to brave a modern woman's "Leap in the Dark:"

I stand drunk in this glitter, under the sky's grey shelter.
The city maple, not half so bitter, hurls itself

in two directions, until both tips darken and disappear,
as I darken my reflection in the smoking mirror

of my home. How faint the sound of dry leaves,
like the clattering keys of another morning, another world.
. . .
Truth waits in the creek, cutting the winter brown hills:
it sings of its needles of ice, sings because of the scars.

Despite "Moonshot: 1969," Paula Allen considered a Laguna moon still female, the mysterious province of woman:

gazing into the moon reaches of the mind,
searching with careful fingers of sense-memory,
listening inside the ear for lost songs,
almost forgotten footfalls,
feeling gingerly with the tongue-tip of the heart—

This poetess translated blessing from the past in her "Medicine Song:"

I add my breath to your breath
That our days may be long on the Earth;
That the days of our people may be long;
That we shall be one person;
That we may finish our roads together.
May my father bless you with life;
May our Life Paths be fulfilled.

VI

Through signs of words, poets add breath to our breath. Of the hundreds of Indian poets anthologized and the thousands unpublished, the fifty or so discussed here make up an American Indian literary renaissance, perhaps better termed an emergence, as the Pueblos speak of coming up through layers of world-realities. The Homeric epics in sixth century Greece, no less than the Bible, the Confucian Odes, or the Upanishads and Vedas of India, were set down in such transitional artistic fertility, as oral traditions found shape in print.[4] In Native America tribal ties shuttle to older wisdoms, as the artists weave themselves identity through new word tapestries. "The past is always the past as it is always the present," Elizabeth Cook-Lynn observes in *Then Badger Said This*.[5]

So Indian artists shape and are shaped by a past that continues to inform them. Jim Ruppert notes, "The poet/singer draws his strength from the ceremonies and sacred stories, variations of secular materials, oral history, personal reminiscences, place names, charms, prayers, lyrics and laments, and popular characterizations of places and animals, just to mention a few. It is essential that the writer gives back and enriches these. The dynamic between the writer and this varied, growing cultural material helps define the writer and his relationship to the community."[6] Always integrative, Native American arts correlate spirit and use in the beauty of concrete forms—pots, walls, baskets, blankets, carvings or clothing serviceable in the common aesthetics of tribal life.

Poems chant sources of vision, as well as revelations of craft; they present *re*visions of Indian ways, looking, and looking again. A poetic awareness in and of the world serves to place artists communally among related life-forms in all things. What begins as a lump in the throat, an event known as a name, or a dream that intensifies waking, patterns the world's common significance. Indians live among many cultures, hearing ancestral *and* contemporary voices, making the best of diverse ways. Their dreams, angers, searchings, prayers, loves, and myths bow from one horizon to another, refracted in the prisms of Native American literatures today.

NOTES

1. See *Word Senders*, Special Issue on American Indian Translation, *American Indian Culture and Research Journal*, Vol. 4, Nos. 1–2 (Spring 1980), Kenneth

Lincoln, ed., UCLA American Indian Studies Center.

2. Leslie Silko's "An Old-Time Indian Attack Conducted in Two Parts" first appeared in *Yardbird Reader* (Berkeley: Yardbird Publishing Co., 1977); reprinted in the Native American Issue of *Shantih*, 4 (Summer-Fall 1979), 3–5; reprinted in Geary Hobson's *The Remembered Earth: An Anthology of Contemporary Native American Literature* (Albuquerque: Red Earth Press, 1979). Also see Geary Hobson's "The Rise of the White Shaman as a New Version of Cultural Imperialism," first appearing in *Yardbird Reader* (Berkeley: Yardbird Publishing Co., 1976), reprinted in *The Remembered Earth*. Also see Wendy Rose's poem, "For the White Poets Who Would Be Indian," in Dexter Fisher's *The Third Woman: Minority Women Writers of the United States* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1980), first appearing in *Academic Squaw: Reports to the World from the Ivory Tower* (Martin, S.D.: Blue Cloud Press, 1977).

3. Elizabeth Carmichael, *Turquoise Mosaics from Mexico* (London: Trustees of the British Museum, 1970), p. 12.

4. Andrew Welsh examines the connections between "primitive" poetry and modern poetics in *Roots of Lyric: Primitive Poetry and Modern Poetics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978).

5. Elizabeth Cook-Lynn, *Then Badger Said This* (New York: Vantage, 1977), p. 19.

6. Jim Ruppert, "The Uses of Oral Tradition in Six Contemporary Native American Poets," *UCLA American Indian Culture and Research Journal*, Vol. 4, No. 4 (Winter 1980), p. 88.

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