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Darkness In Saint Louis Bearheart. By Gerald Vizenor. Saint Paul, MN: Truck Press, 1978. 241 pp. pap. \$5.95.

Imagine this: Carter's top advisors are dissatisfied with the forecasts received from think-tank inhabitants, so they decide to draw upon a different source of information—creative writers. A fund is established for a committee of authors known for their ability to make pilgrimages into unknown quarters; the committee's charge is to write a book-length forecast for the next two or three decades. The transportation costs severely strain the budget, especially since some of the members have to journey from death, but the committee is finally assembled. The members include several famous and popular authors (Dante, Chaucer, John Bunyan, Jonathan Swift, Henry Fielding, and L. Frank Baum), several modern American writers (Thomas Pynchon, Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., Carson McCullers, and Hunter Thompson) one film director (Fellini), and to insure a truly American committee, an Anishinabe storyteller respected for his knowledge of traditional tales and contemporary reservation and urban stories, and two Native American authors (Leslie Marmon Silko and N. Scott Momaday). The Indian members' shared experiences with journey narratives and stories and poems about bears give direction to the committee's efforts. But by the time the book is finished, the Carter administration is long gone. The new advisors view the forecast with various degrees of horror and bewilderment and file it away in a remote BIA office in Minnesota.

Of course the Carter administration isn't about to fund such a project, especially during an election year. But the composition of this imaginary committee should offer some idea of the conglomerate nature of Gerald Vizenor's *Darkness in Saint Louis Bearheart*—one of the most provocative works of fiction produced by a Native American author since the publication of Momaday's Pulitzer Prize winning *House Made of Dawn* in 1968.

Because of the wide variety of styles and subjects used by Vizenor, it is difficult to offer a summary of the book. Nevertheless, a brief enumeration of significant episodes and primary characters is a necessary introduction to Vizenor's startling combinations of visions and satiric speculations. After the preface (discussed below), the first six chapters (pp. 1-29) offer historical background for the narrative and provide the incident that provokes the journey. The setting is an Anishinabe reservation in Northern Minnesota (Vizenor is of Anishinabe and French descent and is a member of the White Earth Reservation in Minnesota). For four generations the Proud Cedarfairs—shamans who derived sacred knowledge from the cedars and the animals, especially bears—successfully defended

a sacred circle of cedar against white government officials and tribal leaders. But near the end of the twentieth century after all the oil reserves are gone, the Fourth Proude is confronted by an energy-starved government that promises its officials firewood allotments and a revenge-crazed tribal leader who burns down Proude's cabin in an attempt to kill him. Proude, his wife, seven sacred crows, and an assortment of mongrel dogs escape and begin a long pilgrimage from Minnesota to a New Mexico pueblo ruin in Chaco Canyon near the Navajo reservation. Traveling on foot or in illegal vehicles powered by illegally hidden gas (for instance, a Bicentennial postal truck) they gradually collect eleven other pilgrims (bringing the total to an unlucky thirteen) that would delight a Fellini or a Pynchon. A few of the more bizarre pilgrims include Benito Saint Plumero (Bigfoot), who is in love with a bronze statue and has a gigantic penis ("president jackson"); Bishop Omax Parasimo, a priest who reveres tribal spiritual powers, repeats key words in triplicate, and wears female "metamasks"; Lilithe Mae Farrier, the *abita animosh* (half-dog) who loves-hates her two boxers (they wear mittens over their claws when they make love to her); and Pio Wissakodewinini, a mammoth, mixed-blood parawoman who was falsely accused of raping two white women. He was sentenced to become a woman (surgery and hormone treatments) and eventually became a feminist leader. But after the government started to collapse, s(he) couldn't get female hormones; "her pendulous breasts shriveled, his beard returned and her voice wavered and vibrated" (p. 75). S(he) finds some relief by wearing the Bishop's female metamasks. As weird as the pilgrims are, they often seem tame as compared to the other survivors of the energy crisis they meet along the way: a commune of female poets ("weirds and sensitives") who eat their pets and revel in the orgiastic splendors of Bigfoot's president jackson; a group of homosexual, cannibalistic ex-priests (the Gay Minikins); Sir Cecil Staples, the evil gambler who rules over a trailer ruins in What Cheer, Iowa, where the odds are five gallons of gas against the life of his opponent (if the opponent loses, he gets to choose his means of death from Cecil's collection of traps and tortures); various families of cripples and freaks, the offspring of chemical pollution; the incoherent directors of a word hospital in Bioavavicious, Kansas; the owners of a witch-hunt restaurant who strap their victims to the ceiling for several days before butchering them; the dogmatic enemies of terminal creeds who live behind a red wall and poison one of the pilgrims, Belladonna Darwin-Winter Catcher, with a sugar cookie; and the power-greedy white laborers who try to build a utopia in Santa Fe by reviving the territorial governor system and the inquisition.

As this enumeration suggests, Vizenor can use his characters and

situations to cover a broad territory, ranging from recounts of traditional Native American beliefs and narratives to satires of contemporary Indian and non-Indian figures and attitudes. But in spite of the rambling and wide-ranging scope of the book, *Darkness in Saint Louis Bearheart* does have its unities: many of the plot's elements are introduced in the preface; there are various types of recurring motifs and arguments, such as Proude's visionary returns to the cedars and the Mississippi River, and variations on the theme of terminal creeds; and there is a symmetry to the narrative structure, which opens with two primary characters, builds to thirteen pilgrims, begins the demise of individual pilgrims midway through the book, and ends with the focus on the two original characters (who live with two dependent pilgrims). Moreover, the suspense of the pilgrimage narrative itself (namely, will they make it?) and the expectation that the reader will hear the "story behind" each pilgrim help to maintain the reader's interest from episode to episode.

The most important unifying element in the book, however, is Vizenor's desire to write a contemporary—indeed futuristic—narrative founded upon the conventions of ancient Native American storytelling traditions. In part, this attempt involved the use of specific sources. (For example, "The Dog-Husband" tale collected in Stith Thompson's *Tales of the North American Indians* is very similar to several episodes in Vizenor's book.) But Vizenor did much more than borrow from Anishinabe and other tribal stories. He used basic conventions of five major types of traditional oral narratives. Proude's final passage into a different world—the world of human-bear visions—is a restatement of the emergence theme found in many origin narratives; the pornographic extravaganzas, the episodic structure, the sudden appearance and disappearance of characters, the lack of motivational explanations, and the surprising combinations of good and evil, wisdom and stupidity in such characters as Bigfoot and Zebulon Matchi Makwa echo the structure and characterization of trickster tales; Proude's narrow escapes and his desire to lead the way to a new world recall hero narratives; the journeys to strange places populated by strange creatures evoke memories of "star-husband" and other journey legends; and, of course, the many visionary, mental, and sexual encounters between humans and animals recall traditional animal parent, spouse, and lover tales. Furthermore, the emphasis on balance and harmony, found in many different types of traditional stories, is stressed in the book: with the possible exception of Sun Bear Sun, all the pilgrims who perish die as a direct or indirect result of being possessed by selfish passions that upset fragile balances. *Darkness in Saint Louis Bearheart* should not be read as a novel, or a picaresque travel narrative, or even as a satirical allegory. It should be approached as an ambitious

attempt to blend these European written forms with Native American oral traditions.

Thus Vizenor's *Darkness in Saint Louis Bearheart* joins a growing number of book-length fictions, short stories, and poems written by talented Native American authors—works such as Leslie Silko's "Yellow Woman" and *Ceremony*, Simon Ortiz's "Men on the Moon" and *Going for the Rain*, Hyemeyohsts Storm's controversial fictional history *Seven Arrows*, and N. Scott Momaday's *The Way to Rainy Mountain* and parts of *House Made of Dawn*. All these writers have attempted to blend written and oral tradition. All realize how difficult this task is.

In Vizenor's case the primary difficulty seems to be the clashes between certain conventions of satirical writing and specific characteristics of oral performance. The bizarre sex and violence of a trickster cycle is "digestable" when it is presented over several nights, each night being devoted to one or two episodes. But when numerous episodes and sub-episodes are compressed between the covers of a book and experienced in one or two sittings, the accumulation of sex and violence may become offensive to some readers or boring to others—boring because the general nature of the characters and events become so predictable. At the beginning of the pilgrimage, especially during the short episodes and sub-episodes of the female poetry commune and the Gay Minikins sections, this negative result of transforming oral to written forms poses problems. In the later, more fully-developed episodes the pace of the sex and violence is more acceptable. One of Vizenor's other difficulties grows out of his talents as a satirist, especially his ability as a punster. Some of the puns work very well, particularly in the preface, part of which is set in a BIA heirship office. Here he hints about the nature of the book with puns about heirship/hairship records and grave reports. But in quite a few other instances—as when a white cannibal tosses a human heart to the pilgrims and says, "eat your fucking hearts out" (pp. 170-171) or when Pio, the parawoman with metamasks, is indirectly linked with the Navajo holy being Changing Woman—the puns either distract the reader with their blatancy or lead to implications that seem contrary to the intent of the episode.

In spite of these difficulties, Vizenor's ambitious attempt to blend written and oral traditions offers some striking reading experiences. Especially noteworthy are the opening chapters that describe how the Proude Cedarfairs outfought and outwitted their enemies, the tragic yet beautiful mixing of Lakota beliefs and confused death visions that guide Belladonna through her death anxieties, and the appearance and prophecies of the marvelous, all-knowing pueblo clowns near the end of the journey. Such episodes, Vizenor's imagination and wit, and his willing-

ness to mingle written and oral forms make this reviewer hope that the Bear inside Gerald Vizenor continues to laugh and to share his dreams and visions with us.

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Finding the Center: Narrative Poetry of the Zuni Indians. From Performances in the Zuni by Andrew Peynetsa and Walter Sanchez. By Dennis Tedlock, trans. Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1978. 298 pp. \$4.50.

Dennis Tedlock's most recent edition¹ of *Finding the Center*, a collection of ten Zuni tales interspersed with black-and-white graphics, does not merely represent another recording of Pueblo Indian material similar to the myths gathered by the Boasian anthropologists Ruth L. Bunzel and Ruth Benedict in the 1930's,² but primarily illustrates a change in attitude toward Indian culture and its significance for contemporary literature and society. While the earlier versions as well as most modern renderings of oral narratives were published in prose format, Tedlock, dissatisfied by the gap between the spontaneity of the narrator's performance and the rigidity of the written prose presentation, searched for a form that would more adequately reproduce the poetic "singsong"-quality of the Zuni stories.³

Obviously he recognizes the affinity between the role of the Indian storyteller and the goal of "Objectism" in "getting rid of the lyrical interference of the individual as ego, . . . that peculiar presumption by which Western man has interposed himself between what he is as a creature of nature . . . and those other creations of nature."⁴ Tedlock in his preface refers to Charles Olson's statements on "projective verse," specifically to his emphasis on the relevance of the human voice and the predominance of the ear over the eye as a "measurer" for poetry. In analogy to the "objectist" notion of the poem as a high-energy construct which is infused with kinetic force by "breath," he adapted devices from "concrete poetry" to the Indian texts. Stressing the importance of silence, he broke the Zuni narratives into lines and marked the pauses by strophe-breaks. In the introduction to the Bison edition, he explains the few standard typographic devices he chose to indicate the vocal modulations