

UCLA

American Indian Culture and Research Journal

Title

Absentee Indians and Other Poems. By Kimberly Blaeser.

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/593950xh>

Journal

American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 27(2)

ISSN

0161-6463

Author

Heldrich, Philip

Publication Date

2003-03-01

DOI

10.17953

Copyright Information

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

Reviews

Absentee Indians and Other Poems. By Kimberly Blaeser. East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2002. 128 pages. \$24.95 paper.

The poems in Kimberly Blaeser's latest collection trace a journey that is simultaneously one backward and within, a poet finding a comfortable self-understanding from her family, tribal community, and the natural world. Perhaps the book's preface describes best the book's movement: "Another absentee Indian, home to visit. . . . Claiming home, asks a blessing" (xi). Such blessings locate themselves in everyday moments of elevated significance, such as ice fishing in "The Last Fish House" or in the metaphorically charged "Meeting Place" about the bond between generations. These poems, some fifty in all, with many referencing northern Minnesota's Ojibwe country, pulse with vital, foundational memories that help to place the absentee Indian back on familiar ground.

Readers will find in this collection—Blaeser's second after *Trailing You* (Greenfield Review Press, 1994), winner of the Diane Decorah First Book Award from the Native Writer's Circle of the Americas—a maturing writer who has developed a comfortable style, a facility with an art of "an aesthetic older than our remembrance of it" (p. 127). Her style of probing memory, particularly family memory, seems to pick up where *Trailing You* left off. Blaeser also writes self-consciously from an established tradition of Indian writers—Simon Ortiz, Gerald Vizenor, Adrian Louis, and Joy Harjo—representing a generation that has provided direction and inspiration. Although any book with so many poems is bound to have its weaknesses, the collection's strength lies in its initial and final sections, which act like bookends framing major themes that Blaeser circles, such as the need for home, the nourishment from family, and the importance of community, place, and the natural world.

The poems of the first section, the collection's strongest, form a poem cycle that explores the absentee Indian's profound need to return to familial ground:

Absentee Indians.
Back for a memory
a fix if they could find it
get them through

till next pow-wow
 sugarbush
 funeral
 next lonely.
 Old Man Blues we call it,
 emptiness bubbling up like a blister
 ready to pop.
 Ain't no cure for it
 but home. (p. 3)

Such a bluesy theme of the healing nourishment of home is similar to approaches in the work of many Native American writers from Leslie Marmon Silko to Anita Endrezze. Home has a revitalizing power, especially for the absentee Indian who lives perhaps unconnected or invisibly in the general population. The importance of home and its connection to family and community can make even the tragic aspects of reservation life seem ironically welcome, as Blaeser suggests through the humor of "Twelve Steps to Ward Off Homesickness":

II

Scatter machine parts around your lawn. Volunteer to let a friend set his old beater up on blocks in your yard.

.....

IV

Look in the mirror and say "Damn Indian" until you get it right. Stop only when you remember the voice of every other law officer that ever chanted those words.

.....

IX

Take your morning vitamin with warm, flat beer—3.2 if you can get it. Follow with yesterday's coffee heated over. Repeat daily until the urge to drive across three states disappears.

.....

XII

If all else fails, move back. (pp. 5–6)

The use of tragicomic humor both to embrace and criticize tribal life will seem more the style of Sherman Alexie, but Blaeser does it well in "Twelve Steps." However, humor is not Blaeser's predominant mode, as much as the realm of memory in such pieces as "The Last Fish House" or "Passing Time."

A piece of lyric beauty, "The Last Fish House," sets its metaphoric lines in the icy waters where the ritual past merges with the present to form a ". . . moment of arrival / . . . / . . . of quiet centering / in the blue white middle of being / here" (p. 12). Ice fishing represents less a sport and more a time for sharing between generations: "Fishers of fishers / gathered in the darkened ice shack. / Passing snacks whispered stories / and time between us" (p. 13). The kitchen of "Passing Time" serves a similar function to the fish house, where family and friends can gather together:

We are kitchen sentries on duty
 and call out when company comes.
Biindigen.
 Visitors keep coming in
 the screen door revolving
 like seasons of the moon. (p. 19)

In this kitchen, generations speak about ritual routines, about cards or cribbage playing, or they share stories of birds and the gathering of wild rice. The power of these poems comes from their acute particularity, the tension over what must be shared and what can slip away in the time between visits home.

Blaeser brings her careful observation and her eye as an amateur wildlife photographer to her poems of the natural world. These poems, such as “Tracks and Traces,” suggest that nature can be as fortifying as family. More than simple images of the outdoor world, Blaeser writes about these moments, as do nature-oriented poets such as Pattiann Rogers or Joseph Bruchac, to seek greater self-understanding or to see the self as an intrinsic part of the environment’s ecology as in “What the Sun Has Left of Amber” that asks “. . . is it my own hands / upon the veins / of every fallen leaf?” (p. 34).

Where the collection has its weaknesses are in poems that lack the tensions and insights of the more successful poems, poems too impenetrably personal or those not fully developed, that seem purposefully exiled to the rear of the book. Peppered within the collection are also haikus—perhaps in some way an homage to the haikus of Gerald Vizenor—that read more like exercises. And Blaeser’s poems about mothering tend to teeter on the brink of the sentimental. Although such pieces about parenting can be necessary for the parent-author to write, they must transcend the inherent risks of an already emotionally laden subject to present something at stake in the described parent-child encounter, as do the best parenting poems of Sharon Olds, Simon Ortiz, Eavan Boland, and William Stafford. Pieces such as “Don’t Burst the Bubble” and “Up-Ducky-Down,” while about significant developmental moments in a parent-child relationship, lack the sophistication of the collection’s more realized pieces. Such, of course, are the risks of a large collection.

A reader looking for surprise or novelty from Blaeser won’t find it in *Absentee Indians*. Neither will readers find the explorations of various modes common to first books. Instead, Blaeser writes in her best pieces as a grounded poet with an established aesthetic approach. The poems do not break new ground so much as reconnoiter her developed style, her self-described “community alive in my poems,” the “history we were born into, a collection of family names and accounts we have heard, a map of places we have traveled” (p. 127). Such poems find their strength in voicing the necessity of family, the influence of community—one word, one story, one memory to be passed along. Blaeser’s work, as in the resonant “Y2K Indian,” celebrates the togetherness needed to reinvigorate the absentee Indian with the vital sense of home, that vital polyphony found in “*writing the circle / of return*” (p. 131).

Philip Heldrich
 Emporia State University