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Four California Poems

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EDITOR'S NOTE: Wendy Rose was born in Oakland, California in 1948 of Chowchilla Miwok and Hopi ancestry. She is currently working on a Ph.D. in anthropology at the University of California, Berkeley. Her poetry has been widely anthologized and she is the author of three books of poetry: Hopi Roadrunner Dancing (Greenfield Review, 1973), Long Division: A Tribal History (Strawberry Press, 1976), and Academic Squaw: Reports to the World from the Ivory Tower (Blue Cloud Quarterly, 1977). Three of the California poems presented here have appeared separately in the following literary publications: "For Mabel: Pomo Basketmaker and Doctor," Dodeca; "Protecting the Burial Grounds," Phantasm; and "Redwood," Contact II. "Trickster" will appear in The Remembered Earth (Red Earth Press, Gerald Hobson, ed.) All are Copyright © 1978 by Wendy Rose.

For Mabel: Pomo Basketmaker and Shaman

Medicine song
moves air
into filaments
of flying skin: lets us believe
how we felt
the tear-forced storm
push our hands
into god;
the grasses weep upwards
into a sky, grey and black
and tan like a basket,
in circles and oblongs
and platters of blue.
In monotone daylight
is the sound
the sound of healing bone.

Red Wood

The remotest days of
 our growth in China
 are sweeping
 by my throat; in that song
 I hear the sherds
 of frost-white grandmother
 peeling the red bark back
 along the tall trees,
 deftly skinning the forest
 with her eyes that become
 black stars
 through which we see
 each other as we dance.
 Huffing, leaning
 on right-angled sticks,
 the weight placed wrong
 we touch
 and twine knee to knee
 our feathers swinging
 back and forth as parts
 of the animals we are.
 Our feet powder
 the painted hill dust
 and raise valley fogs
 of blue and yellow
 as we stretch and turn our toes
 to lift acorns up from the earth.
 Giving these back to the trees
 we rain on them
 and rain on them
 leaching the taste
 of lightning
 from their souls
 til they are ready
 with acorn mash
 to be swallowed.
 Being one moment the owl,
 then antelope, then bear,
 then hornet . . . Grandmother's guessed
 in the handgame a good guess again
 and her pink granite hands
 scoop up all the shells.

Trickster

Trickster's time is not clicked off neatly
 on round dials nor shadowed in shifty digits
 on the earth; he counts his changes slowly
 and is not accurate. He lives in his own
 mess of words, his own spilled soup. He sees
 when you are spread and trapped and numb; when
 you have stretched to your limit and cannot bear
 to hear the frozen words circle above you like ravens
 and, like grubs, stretch into fleshy songs at your feet.
 Trickster turns to wind, Trickster turns to sand,
 Trickster turns walking off with your singer's tongue
 left invisible, left groping for direction.
 Trickster is the whistling coyote
 with borrowed coat of patches, with stolen
 soup on his face; we see only his tail
 as he steals all the words we ever knew.



Protecting the Burial Grounds

Womb-sopped Woman, Round Woman:
the sad and earth-stained leaves that
swallow your buckeye burdens are sterile
in grinding-hole bedrock, waylaid
into deep-sea galaxy of obsidian.

Ohlone Woman, Costanoan Woman:
with saltwater I see you
cupping the coast live oak,
waking up the soaproot shoots
to line your chin with tattooed puberty,
a woman's badge that
from village to village
shadows your soul with
a thirst for names.

Abalone Woman, Obsidian Woman:
it's you that's spawned
by grasshopper hands.
I am fat and honored
before you.

[Context: this was a song of sitting before a bulldozer on an archaeological site, a sacred ground, near San Jose, California. A local Ohloné woman knew that her great-grandmother was buried there.]

