

Native poets featured in anthology

By Ginny De Vries

THE CLOUDS THREW THIS LIGHT: Contemporary Native American Poetry edited by Phillip Foss.

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"The Clouds Threw This Light," an anthology of seventy-seven Native poets, includes such notable writers as N. Scott Momaday, Simon Ortiz, and Wendy Rose.

Works of three Alaskan writers are presented in the anthology. Edgar Anawrok, an Inupiat Eskimo, has done much of his writing from the Fairbanks Correctional Center. Two of his three selections are called "Letter Home." Anawrok is a fine writer and his poems are so of a piece that they cannot be quoted unless in their entirety. Like so many

poets in this collection, Anawrok writes so well that he makes it look easy. The depth of his work proclaims otherwise.

Mary Tall Mountain, a Koyukon, is another writer whose flowing rhythms make creating poems look effortless. The last stanza of "Prayer Wheel for William" where sound duplicates content is a perfect example of her grace and fluidity. (It reads:)

drifting with the river
turning with the fishwheel
my prayers of you
are turning
turning

Like all good poets, Mary Tall Mountain follows the edict of taking poetry where the pain is. In "Indian Blood" the poet describes life in a foreign classroom as the only Indian child. The sounds and silences within the 3rd stanza powerfully tell the story:

the teacher's voice was loud:
"From the land of the Midnight Sun!"
all of them stared at me

for the first time I felt
their flowing force —
did she ask me to speak
or did I crouch there like a
rabbit
in the curious quiet?

Two stanzas later the poem closes with:

in time I got away
and toward night I crept
into a closet
and bit my hand
till it was pierced
with moons of dark
Indian blood.

The collection also includes two selections by Homer poet Robert A. SwanSon, who is an Ojibwa.

"Us Kids," a poem about Bob's father, begins with a visual image of the man and its five stanzas work through to the final summation: "one hell of a man." Stanza 2 reads:

Dad
driving across the country
stopping at grocery stores
and grand canyons
showing us kids the world
from a forty-eight Ford

or a *Look* magazine

In four images, Bob effectively balances the vast scope of the Grand Canyon and a tour across the U.S. in a Ford with the inconsequential daily details of grocery stores and *Look* magazines that contribute more to child raising than the big moments.

The compilation was planned as a "poet's choice" collection, where the poets contributed what they believed to be their best work. For sentimental reasons, Bob says he probably prefers "Us Kids" to "Eight Blackfeet" which is a forceful twenty stanza poem about a male dancer. The reader's attention is riveted from the fourth stanza which reads:

he moved slow
to start
his broad shoulders
dipping one
at a time
in slow circles
to the painfully honest conclusion of the poem.

The anthology contains two

long poems by Joy Harjo, a member of the Creek tribe born in Oklahoma. "The Woman Hanging from the Thirteenth Floor Window" is described in stanza five of the poem by that title.

She sees Lake Michigan lagging at the shores of herself. It is a dizzy hold of water and the rich live in tall glass houses at the edge of it. In some places Lake Michigan speaks softly, here it just sputters and butts itself against the asphalt. She sees other buildings just like hers. She sees other women hanging from many-floored windows counting their lives in the palms of their hands and in the palms of their children's hands.

The final lines read:

She thinks she remembers listening to her own life break loose, as she falls from the 13th floor window on the east side of Chicago, or as she climbs back up to claim herself again.