

Studies in American Indian Literature

NEWSLETTER
of the
Association For Study
of
AMERICAN INDIAN LITERATURES

602 Philosophy Hall
Columbia University
New York, N.Y. 10027

STUDIES IN AMERICAN INDIAN LITERATURES

The Newsletter of the Association for the
Study of American Indian Literature

Volume 7, No. 1. Winter, 1983

Editor: Karl Kroeber, Columbia University
Bibliographer: Lavonne Brown Ruoff,
University of Illinois, Chicago
Assistant to the Editor: Richard L.
Braverman

ASAIL Bibliography, No. 4
Maurice Kenny

Maurice Kenny is a member of the Mohawk nation. Though he currently resides in Brooklyn, he grew up in northern New York State, where he lived on and off a reservation, and where he developed his strong ties with the Mohawk culture of his father.

The authentic poetic voice is for Kenny not merely a lyrical inner voice, but an oracular public one. He consequently stresses his affinity with the traditional storyteller or public singer of tribal days, and his poetry bears the rhythmic influence of song and chant. And as he is most interested in poetry as a performance, a public enactment, he has traveled extensively throughout America, performing his poetry in many colleges and universities.

Maurice Kenny is currently the co-editor of a literary monthly, *Contact II*, and editor and publisher of Strawberry Press, which promotes the work of native Americans.

Maurice is a travelling man, spreading both good cheer and acerbic commentary across the country and into Canada. Just before voyaging forth on a tour of the Northwest and California last August, he sent us the following, admirably expressive of both his personality and commitments.

Proliferation

My friend, Rochelle Ratner, invited me to spend a few days at her new country home outside Granville, N.Y. She asked me north as much for my "expertise" in flora and fauna as for my cooking, she joked. She had developed a need to know day-lillies from hawk-weed, raspberries from poison ivy, fishers from house cats. Rochelle had been born and reared in Atlantic City and had spent ten years living in Soho, N.Y.C., an area not inhabited too frequently by fishers and goldenrod. She was then in the country and wanting "to learn my land."

The first day north was spent acquainting myself with the lay of the acreage, and acquainting Rochelle with the beauties of her four square: her loganberry brambles on the knoll, the poison ivy she was allergic to, the chokecherry, the wild geraniums, the fruit growing on the pear. The next day we spent driving.

Rochelle was familiar with my abiding interests in Hendricks (Aroniakteka), the Mohawk chief, and Sir William Johnson, an important early settler in central New York State, and one of the leading British officers at the time of the French and Indian War, 1755. I was working on a new collection of poems dealing with their lives and the war, especially the life and times of Molly Brant (Degonwadonti), the elder sister of the infamous

Joseph Brant (Thayendanegea). Molly had been Johnson's only legal wife though he'd had numerous off-spring by a motley assortment of concubines. Lake George was a mere 12 miles, and we set our sights to locate the battlefield where Hendricks lost his life, but where Johnson, however, scored a smashing victory, made himself legendary and changed the course of American history forever.

Lake George, like Lake Placid...higher up the Adirondacks...is an American disaster. It's sardined with curio shops, McDonalds and teenyboppers clad in swim suits. The environment is crowded and confused with phoney antique shops, plastic pizzerias and expensive amusement parks all to the delight of tourists escaping the rigors of summering in New York City.

We found the battlefield and a single battlement standing with a near-nude couple sunning on the furthest rampart. The park's warden gave us a brochure which indicated a monument to both Hendricks and Johnson, also an unknown soldiers' monument, the ruins itself, and something described as being an "Indian Monument." That struck our fancy. Reading further, to my horror, it announced the Indian Monument was in reality a commemoration of the discovery of Lake George, in 1646, by none other than Isaac Jogues, the Jesuit Missionary. We didn't know whether to laugh or sling stones. In April of this year North Country Community College Press released my new collection of poems, Blackrobe: Isaac Jogues. Naturally, my appetite was whet. I won't go into a heated quibble of this fraudulent example of American history except to say that the Jesuit Father, Isaac, was put to death by the Mohawks for having tampered with the peoples' religion, among other reasons, on October 18, 1646, which was certainly a little late in the north calendar year to be discovering lakes which Iroquois, Algonquins, Hurons, and Abnaikis had plied

their boats across for centuries. He may have been the first European to view Lake George, but I have some doubt even of that.

But there was Jogues brassed larger than life on a high pedestal looking north over the lake with his blessed communion fingers extended behind a closed and locked iron fence. A cement path led to the monument and we insisted upon taking the regulated walk. We were met by a staggering, shocking surprise. Within the iron grill the ground-floor was swept with wild strawberry vines whose leaves had already turned red under the hot sun. The leaves bore no fruit. The strawberry is the first natural fruit of the eastern spring. It is the symbol of life to the Iroquois people. It is the name of my press from which I publish, exclusively, Native American poets and artists. Hence the shock. Venus'-looking-glass blossomed amongst the vines. A careless tourist had tossed a pair of scarlet socks before the monument. I almost wrote altar. The shrine was half encircled behind by both cedar and white pine which are very important to Iroquois people. It was under the great white pine that Deganawidah planted the war weapons of the Five Nations (Mohawk, Onondaga, Seneca, Cayuga and Oneida) once convincing these Nations to join into a peaceful League. Cedar is sometimes used in medicine, and sometimes in smoke. It holds special properties. I tucked a pine cone in my pocket, and remembered a letter received sometime back from Bro. Benet Tvedten, a Benedictine Monk, who had visited the Jogues shrine at Auriesville, N.Y., and pronounced the shrine an abysmal carnival. (Bro. Benet, a fine man and good friend, wrote an afterward to Blackrobe.)

On inspecting the monument at close range, we discovered two friezes on either side of the stone. The left frieze was of Rene Goupil, also a Jesuit martyr, though never sainted by the church. On the

opposite, outside, wall was a carving of Jean de La Lande, a novice who had accompanied Jogues on his last journey into the Mohawk villages, and who was put to death immediately after Jogues had been dispatched. Behind young Jean an unidentified Mohawk warrior had been carved into the frieze.

Out of the corner of my eye I spotted a small hornet's nest on the pit of Jogues right arm, raised obviously in blessing. His communal fingers had been chopped off. Another nest was attached to the brass behind his moccassined foot, raised in step. We wondered about these significant natural symbols: he is still not welcome to the land.

I plucked a strawberry leaf to carry home and press within the pages of my book, Blackrobe.

Jogues had been successful planting the seeds not only of his Catholicism, but also of destruction which took root and was nourished by his blood, and which still to this moment grows in hearts and pocketbooks of Americans who sell their shorelines, crack open their mountains, cover their desert with cement, blacken the beautiful skies with pollution, murder their fellow creatures with bullets.

Later in the afternoon while tramping through the high grasses and within the low sumac of Rochelle's four acres, I waded through vetch and black-eyed-susans to discover my friend's strawberry patch. We were delighted. Fruit hung on the vines no larger than the size of a thumb-nail. They were sweetly delicious. They had not only survived but proliferated.

Maurice Kenny
Brooklyn Heights, 8/2/82

Books

1. Dead Letters Sent (Troubador Press, 1958)
2. With Love to Lesbia (Aardvark Press, 1959)
3. I am the Sun (White Pine Press, 1979)
4. North: Poems of Home (Blue Cloud Quarterly Press, 1979)
5. Dancing Back Strong the Nation (Blue Cloud Quarterly Press, 1979; White Pine Press, 1981)
6. Only as Far as Brooklyn (Good Gay Poets, 1980)
7. Kneading the Blood (Strawberry Press, 1981)
8. Blackrobe (North Country Community College Press, 1982)
9. The Smell of Slaughter (Blue Cloud Quarterly Press, 1982)
10. Greyhounding this America (Heidelberg Graphics, 1982)
11. Boston Tea Party (Soup Press, 1982)

Forthcoming Books

1. Roman Nose and Other Essays (Kastle Press)
2. Coming to an Understanding: The Mama Poems (White Pine Press)

Contributions to Anthologies

1. From the Belly of the Shark (Random House, 1973)
2. Orgasms of Light (Gay Sunshine Press, 1977)
3. On Turtle's Back (White Pine Press, 1978)
4. For the Time Being (Beil Press, 1978)
5. From the Hudson to the World (Hudson River Clearwater Sloop, Inc., 1978)
6. The Remembered Earth (Red Earth Press, 1978; University of New Mexico Press, 1981)
7. Singing in the Dawn (Heritage Press, 1980)
8. Trends (Paisley College, Scotland, 1981)
9. Native American Writing (The Greenfield Reivew Press, 1982)

Forthcoming Contributions to Anthologies

1. Stories by Contemporary Native Americans (U.C.L.A. Press, 1983)
2. The First One Hundred (Bellevue Press, 1983)
3. Text/Projects (New Rovers Press, 1983)
4. Contemporary Authors/Poets (Macmillan, 1984)
5. The Male Muse (Crossing Press, 1983)

Baskets of Sweetgrass: Maurice Kenny's "Dancing Back Strong the Nation" and "I am the Sun"

Maurice Kenny's slim volume of only 23 poems, Dancing Back Strong the Nation (Blue Cloud Quarterly Press, 1979). now out of print, has its origins, fittingly, in the sacred Longhouse of the Mohawk Nation, oldest in the country, resting on the borders of Canada and the U.S. A second printing (White Pine Press, 1981) adds six more poems, but preserves essentially the same mood and tone of the first. Both volumes move with the mystery of poetry especially found in Mohawk dance and drum rhythms which Kenny believes to be quintessential to his work.

Central to each volume is a series of poems inspired by the Longhouse dances, social dances that are not taboo, performed by the Wolf, Bear, and Turtle clans. When "Drums," "Dance," "Mocassin," and "The Women" are heard as a simple rhythmic piece--though printed on alternate pages--the poems become music for the listener far away from "mice in the grass/chicory in the field." "Drums drum/...rattles rattle" from the lodge as the people "come to greet and thank/the strawberry plants/growing." The beginning soft whisper of "moccasin moccasin," like leather against an earthen floor, rises in pitch as the "wind howls like a wolf on the hill," then falls again to the sound of a single "moccasin." It creates that cosy tribal closeness of the people circling together inside to the beat of the water drum while wildness of thunder and wind provide a companion sound outside. Unlike most contemporary Western poetry, nature here is not alien; all is greeted and thanked alike, "hands gnarled in sweetgrass/...hands wet with babies." Kenny's own testimony to this effect declares his

purpose in writing poetry: "I write about the Nation with the idea of keeping the campfires, village fires alive."

These dance poems, as well as many others in the volume, attest to Kenny's firm commitment to "our own natural speech in poetry." The first word of the untitled epigraph is "Listen..." Faces of listeners who have read the poems previously light up as Kenny's voice makes the words that have lain flat on the page dance with the chants of his childhood. Kenny, who once sang to himself in the fields where weeping willows were his sanctuary, thinks "every poem should be able to be sung, or it is not a poem." His song is the ceremonial naming of things--a listing so often heard in tribal song--discovering each thing's sacred center as in "Yaikni," "when elms were sweet/squash tasted of sun/corn grew in circles." Each song is sensual with simple tastes, smells, and touches: "cedar scented afternoon/...sweetgrass is for weaving/and summer berries/for a child's tongue..."

Talk about orality in poetry is cheap these days, but with Kenny's poems it is not an attempt to "get with it" of the poetry circuit. He sees himself rather as "the medium for the voice of nature to come through...in the rebirthing of things." But he disavows all claims to being a "nature poet" like Frost or Dickinson who merely observe. "I use natural imagery because that's the imagery I know best. I am really not a nature poet. I try to become the nature itself. I am the birch tree...I am nature; you are nature." In "Legacy" such a binding of man and nature, incarnation if you will, is created. "[M]y face is grass/color of April rain;/arms, legs are the limbs of birch, cedar;/my thoughts are winds/which blow..."

From Dancing Back is forged the recurring symbolic language for much of his poetry. Strawberries, pollen, the sacred animals,

sweetgrass, each spoken with reverence of ritual and litany from the sacred lore of his people. The recurrence of these imagers produces not the tiresome pretentiousness of private feeling, but rather intimations one can recognize as the belonging to home--the village fires.

Not all of Kenny's images are filled with the optimism of summer--"To go home/is always hard" ("North in Winter"). He avoids white Americans' need for Hiawatha dreams. Whether it is beating up a jeering white face outside the bowling alley ("Saturday Night"), "a little blood/wouldn't spoil our feathers much," or striking back against the pillagers of the reservation ("Reynolds & Chevrolet"), "aluminum hills strike against morning," Kenny is not forgetful that the "jails bulge with people/torn to booze to crime ("Warrior") or the St. Lawrence is dying with her brothers "in the summer mud of her shores" ("St. Lawrence River"). Rather than curse the darkness, Kenny believes "children should know hills/under their naked feet." He sets the tone for the dark/light visions of later poems in Only As Far As Brooklyn, Kneading the Blood, and Blackrobe exploring delusion, pain and death. As Paula Gunn Allen observes in her excellent forward to the volume: "The Native American poet, whose life is idiscordant at every level, faces the necessity of creating wholeness from a life that is biculturated..."

Thus "Wild St rawberry"--symbol of Mohawk renewal--angrily laments the present loss of contact with even our own food. "I sit here in Brooklyn eating Mexican/berries which I did not pick, nor do/I know the hands which did, nor their stories..." A renewal of a simpler, holy age, like Thomas' "Fern Hill," equates the sacred act of picking and eating berries with firmness and growth, "we ate/wild berries with their juices running/down the roots of our mouths and our joy."

In the poem "Legacy" yet another aspect binds itself solidly to Kenny's work, the "legacy" of his Mohawk/Seneca heritage to loan his "word" as a poet to the communal cause. "The obligation I hand/to the blood of my flesh.../that carries my song/and the beat of the drum to the fires of the village/which endures." With these lines a deeper purpose to his sensual orality emerges. "If we keep in touch with our senses, our own tribalisms will merge...a collective spirit, community, can tap into it. It's still in our blood!" He means the latent tribalism of us all, "not just Indian people." Tribal takes on a new meaning. His poems embrace audiences with the words "we" and "you." Not only are the people of the Longhouse dancing back strong the Wolf, Bear, and Turtle, but listeners and readers return to the land with him.

Dancing Back leads us to an earlier, highly praised poem, I am the Sun, first published in 1973 in Akwesasne Notes. The present version by the White Pine Press (1979) appears as a chapbook. It serves as the end piece for most of his readings and reflects Kenny's most fervent feelings. Based on a Lakota Ghost Dance and inspired by the 1973 Wounded Knee confrontations, the poem's subtitle reveals its manifold purposes: "A Song of Praise, Defiance, and Determination." Like the Ghost Dances, the song is a plea for renewal through the return of the sacred arrows embodying the values of the Old Ones. Father (the Almighty), Mother (the earth), and Brother (all of us) are invoked to return the sun, the night, the earth, the spirit of the people. The sorry state of Mother Earth ("Mother, your breast is bare"), the loss of universal brotherhood of man for man and man for beast ("Brother, we cried for you"), and the loss of contact with things spiritual ("Our father has turned his face") motivate this cry for a vision the Hanblecheyapi.

The chant is structured in incantorial fours and

sixes, the sacred numbers of Native American religions, with invocative repetitions of the names of the sacred objects. This repetition is more formalized than in his other poems. The names, recall that terrible historical time of Wounded Knee-Sitting Bull, Black Coyote, Bigfoot--and the spirit of the chant, like Dancing Back, refers to the hypnotic attempts of the first Ghost Dancers to return the land to its primeval state. "We still plant the seed of the sacred tree in your country." (The Mohawk also have a legend that huge silver and gold snakes--Canada and the U.S.--will be driven back into the sea.) But there is more than a reproduction of Lakota dances here. Kenny's plea to the Father to make "a country into a home/a home into the sun" and the final supplication for renewal of spirituality, "Father, give us back our arrows!/We have learned to hold them sacred!" could very well be the chant of any people's movement for a nuclear freeze, for release from oppression, for human dignity. Kenny rightly recognizes that the original Ghost Dance was not as destructive as its enemies supposed and emphasizes the aspects of renewal in its spirit. "We will fill the river with water/...We will build the walls of the dream." Kenny's performances of this chant at readings everywhere, sometimes with tears streaming on his cheeks, have at least electrified the jaded and drawn almost magically the uninitiate what poetry was always about but seldom is heard, the fusion of sound and object.

In retrospect, I realize I've not yet cast the standard critical aspersions for conventions not fulfilled. But with Kenny's poetry that is rarely a problem. These poems attest that he is a careful craftsman, not a self-indulgent scribbler. Rather, the expressive toughness and living sacredness of image in Kenny's poetry weave themselves tight like the sweetgrass of his people. It gnarls the hands

with gathering, but the resulting odor is a lasting sweetness. Thus the natural objects cling to the sturdy form of his song--"Pinch of pollen/for your eyes"--so that there is no need for aesthetic alibis. His poetry is. "I learn rivers/by sitting still."

Carolyn D. Scott
Lindenwood College, St. Louis

* * * * *

Offering it all to the Sea
Duane Niatum's new Songs

It has been slightly more than a decade since the publication of Duane Niatum's first book, After the Death of an Elder Klallam, in 1970. In the 12 years since that first volume, few poets have been as prolific or as successful in finding publishers--both major commercial houses (such as Harper and Row) and fine small presses (such as Strawberry Press). Indeed, aside from Leslie Silko, Simon Ortiz, and James Welch (all three of whom, unlike Niatum, have additional reputations as fiction writers), it would be hard to point out an American Indian poet who has done as well. Although Niatum has not yet achieved the stature of a major poet, it is clear that he is on the path which could lead to that goal and that his work will attract more and more attention in years to come. If anything, it is surprising that Niatum's poetry has not attracted more attention from the critical establishment, for he is not only an important American Indian poet, he is also a writer whose work has strong academic roots.

Songs for the Harvester of Dreams, published in 1981 by the University of Washington Press, is Duane Niatum's newest book of poetry and one which I find

particularly interesting for a number of reasons. For one, I find within it certain themes which have remained constant in Niatum's work since that first volume was published under his original name, Duane McGinnis. (In a note at the start of the second section of Ascending Red Cedar Moon, his first book from Harper and Row, he explains that the cycle of poems is dedicated to the memory of his Great-Aunt "and her father, Young Patsey, Young Patsey's Indian name was Niatum. My Great-Aunt honored me with the gift of this name three years ago. Because of this, I have made it my last name.") The first of those themes might be described as the theme of kinship with American Indian ancestors, both genetic and spiritual. "I, Joseph of the Nez Perce," "Elegy for Chief Sealh," and "After the Death of an Elder Klallam," are three of the strongest examples of this theme to be found in the 1970 volume. As Niatum puts it so beautifully in the last lines of the poem in that same book "Homage to My Indian Ancestors":

I follow chanters rattling their
Sacred elk teeth down the alley
Littered with legends.
Our savage union clangs in the wind
Like crossed knives.

I am my ancestors' keeper.

The linking of past and present, of "chanters" and "Sacred elk teeth" with a word so evocative of disillusion, despair, and desolation as "alley" is very powerful and it is no accident that Niatum plays with the word "savage" and its various contexts (including the racist picture of the Indian as savage) in creating an image which is jarringly effective. In Songs for the Harvester of Dreams, we find that theme, combined with an anxiety often

linked to remembered losses and the fear of further loss, in the very first of the short lyrics which make up the first half of the book, "Dream of the Burning Longhouse." Here is the poem in its entirety:

Spinning away from the center,
Lost to the flames,
The old ones break down to shadow and ash.
Am I banished from the country of my blood?
Has my heart thrown the drum to the earth?
My spirit lost its song to the river?
On my body, have we reached your water cave?

The poem, like all of the 28 poems in the first section of the book is very short. (Of those 28 poems, most are less than 10 lines in length and the two longest ones are 12 lines each.) Its language is condensed and the imagery is both personal and consciously "Indian" Niatum speaks of the "country of my blood"--a personal reference, we may assume (if we know the author's work), to the Pacific Northwest and the Klallam past, which the burning longhouse seems to symbolize. Although I find the imagery of the "water cave" in the last line a bit hard to grasp (Does it come from Klallam traditions, from western academic traditions, or is it a personal symbol of Niatum's own invention?), the poem is effective, evocative, full of painful uncertainty. It is ironic that the poem's language, considering what it is saying, should be so mellifluous--as are all of the songs in this first half of the book. Since Duane Niatum is a very careful poet, a very hardworking one (not a single poem which was previously published in a magazine or chapbook has escaped significant revision before being included here), I am sure that he is conscious of that irony.

The sense of loss which Niatum faces so often in

his poems, however, is always balanced against something more lasting. His poetry finds a strength in the place, the animals, the people of the Klallam (and American Indian) past--which lives even in the flawed and often confusing present. I once told someone that the giant Antaeus of Greek myth must have been an Indian, for he always drew strength from contact with the land. Again and again Niatum returns home in his poems--and in his life. When Duane Niatum was editor of Harper and Row's Native American Writing Series, he quit the job to return to the state of Washington, his beloved Klallam country, and an uncertain economic future. Salmon never refuses the call of the spawning stream.

A second theme, and one which I am less pleased with in Niatum's work, is the theme of lost loves, women who have come into and then gone from the poet's life. This theme, I believe, has produced some of his weakest poems and is can be seen in the following lines from "Poetry at Four A.M." in After the Death of an Elder Klallam:

Singing poppies and smelling poems
and thinking of my love asleep,
six blocks and a lost quarrel away,
my soul crawls with the cricket
under a leaf in the morning rain...

It is admittedly very young poetry and Niatum's strength goes far beyond it. Yet that hone, which comes perilously close to self-pity, occurs a number of times in his newest book as in "First Spring" or "Album of the Labyrinth of Doors." To quote one section of the latter poem:

My friends say I am a hermit.
The last two women who entered and left
My circle agreed with them
When will they see the bird

Bouncing off their window is my heart
Returning to nest in their names.

This theme is obviously an important one to the poet and it is one which he sometimes handles with great skill. However, it also seems to be the place where his words most often become too personal, fall flat or come close to bathos. It is also, interestingly enough, in some of his love poems (though not those in the first half of Songs for the Harvester of Dreams), that his writing seems most academic, most closely linked to "modern" and trendy language, least "Indian." In all fairness, I should acknowledge that Niatum seems aware of this failing himself and gives little signals about it in various places in his work--as in a quote from Frances Densmore's translation of the Chippewa at the start of Ascending Red Cedar Moon or in the poem which was originally titled (in A Cycle fo the Woman in the Field) "Thank You, Louise Bogan" and then revised to "Thanking Some Elder Poets" in Digging out the Roots (Harper and Row, 1977):

When feelings of self-pity
Crawl down my back like a rose-spider,
I remember your parodies of the senti-
mentalists,
Feel ashamed. And only when I live
The failure, am I once more
A man of seed.

In addition to those themes which I find characteristic of Duane Niatum's poetry (though certainly not the only themes in his work), I also find Songs for the Harvester of Dreams interesting for the very clear division which the author makes in the book between two kinds of poems--the brief lyric and the longer, more overtly philosophical, sometimes "confessional" poem. Part I of the book,

of course, as I indicated earlier, consists of the former type and is titled "Voices from the World and Its People." It is certainly that, for the majority of the poems speak with or for the voices of the animal people they are named for: "The Bear," "Grasshopper," "Eagle." Just about all of these poems are chantlike, magical in their effect. They are "dream songs" in the sense of the sort of dreaming understood by Native people, a dreaming which is just as real as (or more real than) waking reality, prophetic, bestowing power. I see two important sources, aside from the teachings of the natural world itself, of these poems and their form. The first is the traditional poetry of the Native people of the northwest, those short songs which (like these songs of Niatum's) can be interpreted on several levels and may have a magical, personal meaning beyond the one most clearly understood on the surface. The second source is that of Eastern thought and Japanese poetry. Like most American poets--whether Indian or non-Indian--Niatum seems to be familiar with the old Chinese and Japanese poets and I sense their presence very subtly in certain poems. Perhaps I am wrong about this influence, but if it is there it is a benign one and one which blends well with the oral literary traditions which are an important part of Niatum's heritage.

Part II of the book is called "Spinning the Dream Wheel." Perhaps the image of roulette wheel was not intended, but it is a simile that works for me, because--as in gambling--the poet sometimes comes out a winner and sometimes comes close to losing his shirt in this part of the book. Some of the poems lack the control of the earlier short lyrics, even though they are technically strong and carefully worked. I've voiced my concern already about the theme of love and loss which weighs so heavily on Niatum's mind in many poems and tough I have no intention of belittling the importance of

that theme of its universality, I believe that it wears thin much quicker than do other subjects in the poet's work. "Cedar Man," which is a very fine poem in the second section, has that muted tone of lost love in the background but goes far beyond that. Look, too, at "Imaginary Drawings of Song Animals"--an absolutely wonderful poem in the way it deals with mutability and the natural world--and the unwaveringly honest poem about his father, "To the Fisherman, Salmon, the Northwest Waters." Any book with three such poems in it is a book anyone serious about poetry should be glad to have written.

There is, in fact, much to talk about and much to celebrate in Songs for the Harvester of Dreams. It is a book which is strongly connected, despite any objections I might have about specific poems or subjects, by deep repeated images: the wheel, the dream, the totem animal, the search for ancestry and self, the loss of love. It is an important book for Niatum and important in the lessons other American Indian writers can learn from it. Drawing on the two very different worlds of his Klallam ancestry and his heritage as a writer in a language which has a strong literary tradition of its own, he has developed as a poet while returning, as a tribal person, to the roots, finding a language which is simple, sometimes hardbitten, yet surprisingly graceful. He has both forged ahead and gone back, listened well to the words of Owl as he dreams them in his poem of the same name:

You will find my feather floating
On the next wave to beach this Sound;
It shall leave your mind at the blue window;
Give you the Duwamish River's way
Of offering it all to the sea,
Offering it all to the sea.

Joseph Bruchac

Does the Crow Fly?
The Poems of Duane Niatum

I like to know where and when we are, in a story or poem. Bodysurfing once north of Santa Monica, I mistimed a wave and got tumbled shoreward under the surf. Since one of my ears has been fenestrated, the sea rolled right into my cochlea, and the four dimensioned world dissolved into a grey delirium, where I could not tell skyward from sandward, or Me from It, let alone where the shore was. Luckily the undertow scraped me along the sand, and pain pointed to "down," so I pushed my head "up," got my feet on the bottom, and was able to claw out into the air and sunlight. It was an interesting experience, but not one I want to repeat, and the doctor who cleaned out sand and pearls from my head suggested that if I wanted to go on hearing, or even living, I should time waves better or stay ashore.

Duane Niatum's poetry is hard to time: like the ocean, its rhythms are not in detail very regular--though perhaps a more sunbronzed reader could ride any given poem like an emerald express to the last ripple of sound, or whatever. Me, I keep on wiping out and crawling ashore bewildered from quite a few of the poems in Pieces (Strawberry Press, Box 451, Bowling Green Station, N.Y. 10004) and Songs for the Harvester of Dreams (University of Washington, Seattle, 1981): glad to be back in prose and not sure where I've been. I wasn't sure, for instance, whether Niatum was talking about a woman or Night personified, in his Night Song:

I step like the heron down
The early evening of her soul's beach.

I call to each of the sparrows

Returning to the sky.

I offer her a necklace of azaleas
To wear beneath the terrace of the sycamores.

Her beauty is good medicine for my song,
The one who sees me naked as the moon.

To keep our bodies near the fire,
I burn all night to reach her hand.

It's hard to see whether Niatum is writing a poem to a young woman whose beauty he has found to be "good medicine," or whether he is making a song for the Night. The first two lines are striking enough--yes, I see the poet as heron stepping in twilight down a beach, although the nature of the English genitive construction is such that I can't tell whether the beach is a woman's soul, or whether that soul just has a beach within it. There is a Cherokee love-charm that says I am walking in your soul, though, and I will assume it is the idea of this that is behind these first two lines of Niatum's poem. So, let us assume we are on the wave and riding safely along: Niatum is writing about a woman; it is a love poem; he says he is walking down the beach of her soul as a heron walks along a beach; and it an early evening.

But in the next two lines he tells us he calls to each of the sparrows returning to the sky. We must have changed scenes remarkably fast here. I don't think herons call to sparrows. So he stepped like a heron, but now he calls to sparrows. To each of them, in fact. And they are returning to the sky. Here I am a little puzzled. In twilight, one sees sparrows flying back to their nests, and from the earth the view is of their returning to the sky--is that it? Well, I haven't wiped out yet, I guess, but this wave is getting wiggly, that's for

sure.

Now the wave really bucks though: in the third stanza he says he offers "her" a necklace a azaleas to wear beneath the terrace of the sycamores. The beach has disappeared, the heron has disappeared, the sparrows have disappeared, but there is a woman still here, and a poet, and they are on a terrace underneath some sycamores, and he has picked a bunch of azaleas, and he offers her a necklace of them. At least I see, by this third stanza, that the poem is not meant to move as consecutive narrative, but is a series of snapshots of the lover: stepping like a heron down a beach, calling to sparrows in the sky, offering a necklace of azaleas. So by this time, I hope, I am hanging ten--and have not yet had to worry about just who the she and I of the poem are supposed to be. They seem to be a lover and his lass, so the question to be resolved by the rest of the poem would seem to be, do they or don't they?

The last two stanzas at first seem to say they do. First, he says her beauty certainly helps his writing the poem--or, in his Indian terms, is good medicine for his song: the Indian terms are broader and richer than the white paraphrase. Then, he says she is the one who sees him naked as the moon; things look very promising, having got from necklace-giving to nakedness. The next to last line seems to say things have in fact turned out very satisfactorily: to keep our bodies near the fire certainly implies that they have been near it, and so it looks as if they are warm, and everything is fine. But then suddenly the very next line, the last one, throws me from my surfboard into a roll of questions. I burn all night to reach her hand, says the last line. Well, what the hell happened? did he reach her hand, or just burn to do so but not succeed in doing it? And how would his burning to reach it (but failing) have helped to keep their bodies near the fire? I would have understood far

better if the last two lines had read:

To keep our bodies near the fire
We burn all night in each other's arms--

though that would be pretty flat and prosy. As the last two lines stand in Niatum's poem, however, I can't be sure what space and time are pictured. The last snapshot is blurred, and I have to go back and see whether a different approach can bring it into focus.

So I will take the poem as being Night's song, sung by Night to (let's say) the Earth. Now everything seems to fall into place. Night steps like the heron down the twilight beach of Earth, as if in Earth's soul. Night calls to the sparrows, who fly homeward; Night offers to Earth an azalea necklace, which we see is a garland of azalea bushes growing beneath a terrace of sycamores. Earth's beauty, so dressed, is good medicine for the song of Night, and Earth sees the Night as naked as the moon. Finally, in the last two lines, Night burns all night (as do moon and stars?) to reach the Earth's hand, and so keeps both their bodies near the fire (of the sun?).

Those are the kinds of trouble I have reading Duane Niatum's poems in his collection Pieces. What seem to be love poems often appear oblique to the point of vagueness, but if read as myth-poems they almost work: the trouble is that I am not quite sure which way to take them. It is possible to find poems more sure of touch than the one I have just considered. For instance, there is Sequim, dedicated "for Ann":

These quiet waters were the Klallams,
Where each shadow hid a sweat lodge,
Each fern an animal free of intruders.
Here, they bathed the mad, the maimed, the

elder,
Gave pity a slope of the land.
So what lingers with you in the marshgrass
Also willows in the air.

I can believe in the literalness of this poem, and feel its emotion, am with its sense of history and its identification with the people and their land and waters. Even here, however, the last two lines dwindle away, are not strong enough for the theme. It is not only their indecisive rhythm, or the repeated open vowels of their last line, which (as Pope said) tire the ear: it is also the uncertainty of identifying their you. Does the poem say that something lingers with the poet, or with the reader, or with Ann, or with all of the above?

My preferences being thus declared, it should be clear why I like certain poems by Niatum more than others. For instance, I like Klallam Song, in his Songs for the Harvester of Dreams, better than the poems I have quoted, because it is clearly set in mythtime and yet is a love poem just as clearly--and a part of its clearness is that its you is certainly the woman to whom the song is being sung:

What creature lights the deep pools of your
eyes,
Within the circle of your dreaming,
O woman who sleeps in my heart?
Because I am poor, a maker of song,
I fly slowly round the luminous branches
Of your moontree, offer you this fire,
O woman who sleeps in my heart.

The fifth and sixth lines here are what move the poem from its ordinary if slightly odd beginning to a startling and original life. If one wanted to carp, one could ask what the deep pools and the moontree are doing in the same poem, and now a

reader moves from one to the other--and then it is maybe uncomfortable to think of some undersea creature lighting up the eyes of one's beloved. But that is quibbling. My guess is, any woman with imagination would like to think of her eyes as wierdly, frighteningly beautiful, and quite a few women would like to have a love fly slowly round their moontree offering fire. But could I just wonder how she also is sleeping in the lover's heart at the same time? Well, usually I want a poem that not only flies but gets from one place to another and flies me with it, maybe through a story, maybe just through some great scenes. But "as the crow flies," so I don't think all poems have to fly rightside up, but there ought to be a strong spirit bowing if they are going to fly in joy as their place. I think Klallam Song has that spirit moving through it, and it can fly in joy. With others of the poems I don't always feel that wind and freshness. Or blowing only in some lines, in other lines flat. There is always an intelligence behind the images, there is the sense that something interesting is meant, and something subtle has been imagined, but the poem often eludes me. I keep going back to Cedar Man (Songs, pp. 33-34): vivid bits, message a lyric lament for loves and for his life to the age of forty. The last stanza of Cedar Man is really striking, and for once has the strength to satisfy its themes:

Called by the creature he
Sees as formless haze, he offers
It more space by staring a fire
While the night fossils the star tracks
Of his nerves.

That is ambitious, and I admire its reach. It has an eeriness like Castaneda's scenes with Don Juan, and gives me a sense of the tribal background of

Niatum, whether of not its references are to the particular stories of his people. I like the use of fossils as verb, and I really like the image of night as fossilizing star tracks--and I ought to like the image of his nerves as such fossilized star-tracks. But I can't quite put that together, or see how it goes with his starting a fire to give the haze-creature more space. In short, the ideas and images don't quite spread out and come alive into a finale that puts the poem's meanings into a picture and a few words. Maybe it is the sense that the poem should not be just about his nerves. He uses a striking visual image, and in part he has been talking about his own sense of pain and loss and missed opportunities at age forty, and in part he has been talking about what a beach, and a fire, and cedar wood and trees can do for a person who is in these beings as part of his nature, when he is in such pain. He almost got it, I say; he is an interesting writer, and I want to keep reading him. I feel the pain and the courage, I see goodness, I guess that this must be a good man with whom to share a beach or a mountain. What I hope is that he will take himself in hand, as Yeats did, when he changed from the earlier cloudy twilight stuff and went for the cold and rook-delighting heaven. Niatum is just no getting old enough to write good poems as well as to make good lines and find striking images. More good poems, that is. I look forward to them. And maybe too, when they are published I will have learned to read better: late as it is, I put myself to school, and take some comfort not to be a fool, as Pope said--but so far I obviously need to learn better how to read Niatum. Can he be persuaded to offer a note or two to help orient readers now and then?

Carter Revard (Osage)
Washington University

Indian Manuscripts Published

Once again, elders of the Tsimshian Indian tribe of Alaska are telling their children age-old legends of their past--a rare history saved with the help of a Columbia library 4,000 miles away. They're reviving an oral story-telling tradition once threatened with extinction, a revival made possible by the preservation of more than 10,000 pages of Tsimshian history, legend and mythology in the University's Rare Book and Manuscript Library.

The papers represent the lifework of a half-Tsimshian Indian, William Beynon, who compiled 252 narratives from interviews with tribal elders early in this century. He sent them--some typed, some in longhand--between 1932 and 1939 to Columbia anthropologist Franz Boas, who in turn donated them to the Rare Book and Manuscript Library 40 years ago. An Alaskan scholar in native American languages calls them "the most extensive and remarkable body of North American native literature ever to exist in written form."

From microfilmed copies of what have become known as the Beynon Manuscripts, the Metlakatla Indian Community of southeast Alaska has printed two paperback volumes of 40 folk tales over the past two years. In Metlakatla, a tiny community on Annette Island outside Ketchikan, the books are bestsellers. For this tribe of 3,000 Alaskan native Americans, the stories are a key to the past and a written heritage for the future.

Russel Hayward, a Tsimshian Indian and the coordinator of language and history of the Metlakatla Indian Community, says, "We have two more volumes ready to go, and we have enough material for five more after that. There's quite a demand, mostly from the elderly who read the stories to

their children and grandchildren and then pass the books around."

The preserver of the Tsimshian oral heritage, William Beynon, was born of a Tsimshian mother and a non-Indian father in 1888 in Victoria, B.C. He grew up speaking both English and Tsimshian. Fascinated by the Indians he interpreted the Tsimshian language for anthropologists until his death in 1958. Although the Beynon Manuscripts have been kept at Columbia for years, it was not until 1978 that the Tsimshians, spurred by a growing interest in their past, tracked down this complete record of their tribal stories, stories which had been handed down orally for generations.

from Columbia University Register

* * * * *

Studies in American Indian Literatures, the Newsletter of the Association for the Study of American Indian Literatures, is issued four times a year. Annual subscriptions are by the calendar year only and are \$4.00. For back numbers and special publications by SAIL consult the editor, 602 Philosophy Hall, Columbia University, New York, NY 10027, to whom contributions and subscriptions should be addressed. Advisory editorial board: Paula Gunn Allen, Gretchen Bataille, Joseph Bruchac, Vine Deloria, Jr., Larry Evers, Dell Hymes, Maurice Kenny, Robert Sayre.

@ 1982 SAIL

STUDIES IN AMERICAN INDIAN LITERATURES