



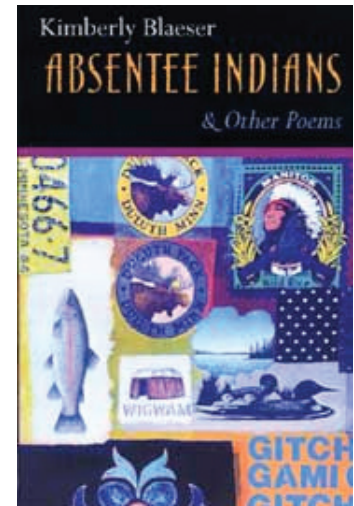
# *Absentee Indians and Other Poems* Kimberly Blaeser

Many years ago, while on a canoe trip through the Boundary Waters in Minnesota, I experienced one of the most intense thunderstorms imaginable. Lightning flashed frequently enough to read by. Thunder was so close the ground trembled continuously, and rain fell thick and hard. After two hours, the storm slowly ebbed, followed by a constant dripping from the tree branches above. I thought it was still raining until I peeked outside. I saw the most wondrous night sky, full of stars and planets and the Milky Way and so clear and crystal. The lake before me reflected it all, undisturbed. I thought for a moment that I was swimming in space as the moon rose over the water.

Reading Kimberly Blaeser's *Absentee Indian and Other Poems*, I returned quickly to this campsite from long ago with the help of words that not only travel, but transcend time and space. While reading Blaeser's poems, we jump from the Boundary Waters to the Alaskan Arctic to the desert Southwest to urban Wisconsin. Seemingly, we are in the present, but unquestionably connected to a past and a future rooted in Blaeser's Anishinabe culture on the White Earth Reservation in northern Minnesota.

The poems in this volume arise from memory and dreams, sometimes lucid and detailed, other times faint in the remembrance of a home long left behind. As Blaeser writes in the preface, "Another absentee Indian dreams of home. Places and seasons drift timeless, faces fluid and ageless [Another absentee Indian] names the markers, like she was writing a pathway" (xi). Reading this, we can begin to see this collection as the story of a road home and sketches of steps along the way. In one poem, "Twelve Steps to Ward Off Homesickness," she lists memories of reservation life, resisting temptation to candy-coat reality:

*Enter your car through the passenger door. Drive it without using reverse. Continue for one week or until you remember a rez car is not a picturesque metaphor. (5)*





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We sense that Blaeser wants badly to go home, but knows she can never return; she has changed too much, been away too long to fit back in to “rez life.” The poignancy in this tension comes through very subtly; her poems are not ostensibly about the emotions of homesickness or longing. Rather, they vividly paint detailed images that belie a deep connection with her childhood home. From “Kitchen Voices”:

*In the crowded rooms of childhood  
listening. Your voices  
the familiar lullaby  
punctuating the world  
from one door away  
. . . Evenings spent eavesdropping  
on pickle jars popping  
as they cool and seal,  
Santa’s mad wrapping frenzy  
on Christmas Eve. (51)*

Even as she longs for the past, Blaeser refuses to romanticize her memories, as in the poem “Night Tremors”: “We orchestrate our own pain. / Find the places / that hurt / most, / test our tolerance / new ways / each passing year” (98). She eloquently faces the realities of life on the reservation and identifies her connection to the reservation even as she is no longer there.

Perhaps the most intriguing aspect of this volume is its structural and thematic reliance on interconnection and community, including Blaeser’s community on the Reservation, her family, her newborn son, children in a Lakota school in South Dakota. The titular first section threads six poems together, each one borrowing for its title a line from the previous poem. Another poem, “Baby Pantoum,” uses a unique rhyme scheme that brings the poem full circle in nine stanzas with only nine different line pairings. The rhyme is subtly revealed as you read or sing it to yourself. Even if she has been alone at a cultural crossroads for much of her life, Blaeser is still acutely aware of how to make her way back to a community.



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Although now on the English faculty at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee and living far from her home, with a young son to keep her busy, Blaeser understands the truth of absentee Indians undoubtedly because she is herself one. She is an absentee Indian deliberately searching for a way to restore some of the places and people of her memories and, maybe, even herself. In the last poem, “Y2K Indian,” Blaeser embraces her dual life while placing herself firmly in community: “Finding their reflections / harbor mine / I become comfortable / with the story of doubleness / learn survival this way. / Another Y2K Indian / writing the circle / of return” (131).

*Reviewed by Andy Reichert*