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All of Us a People: The Poetry of Lance Henson Selected Poems 1970–1983. By Lance Henson. Greenfield Center, NY: The Greenfield Review Press, 1985. \$5.00 Paper.

Lance Henson has chosen deliberately to remain close to his origins in Oklahoma and to the traditions and culture of his Cheyenne ancestors. In the recent *Survival This Way*, Joseph Bruchac's book of interviews with American Indian poets (University of Arizona Press, 1987), Henson describes these origins in relation to traditionalist grandparents who brought him up with a profound awareness of the Cheyenne way, the teachings of the Native American Church, and a vital relationship to the earth. These two great people taught him to understand the beautiful truth that, as he told Bruchac, "Everybody's home should be the center of the world" (p. 108), and he still lives, with his wife and children, in the house he inherited from them.

Selected Poems 1970–1983 is a retrospective of Henson's work selected from five books published in small-press editions, all of them now out of print. A characteristic poem, both in method and subject, is "song for warriors" (p. 29), in which he describes the experience of seeing a dead badger beside a highway, stopping to cut a claw from one of its front feet, and feeling "a deeper loss / in the scent / in the blessing on my hands." The badger, that tough and independent creature that will not be pushed around, minds its own business, and possesses courage and stamina all out of proportion to its size, is a warrior by definition—thus the poem's title—and it is the animal with which Henson most identifies. Its courage and independence are precisely the qualities that enabled the Cheyennes, a warrior tribe of relatively small size, to survive as long as they did, and though Henson told Bruchac that he was not certain whether he really considered himself a warrior, he clearly respects the warrior traditions of his ancestors and as a veteran of Vietnam, a member of the Cheyenne Dog Soldier Warrior Society, and a student of the martial arts recognizes the inter-relationship of physical and spiritual courage.

Henson's attitude toward language is essentially platonic. "We are born out of a perfect state to be here," he told Bruchac, and he writes short poems because "brevity is one way to acknowledge strength and . . . pay homage to the Great Silence

we came out of" (pages 113–114). In the imperfection in which we have our physical being, our only link to the perfection from which we came is language, a magic too precious to be wasted on long poems. The white space that surrounds a poem on the page is the quiet in which words most effectively sound, the silence in which the images made possible by words most powerfully resonate with meaning beyond themselves. Throughout his career, therefore, Henson has maintained the most exacting minimalist standards, freeing the words from all conventional "poetic" interference—punctuation, capitals, rhyme, meter.

These methods can only work if the poet is able to produce images that can carry the emotional burden of the poem. Perhaps because they often originate in the vast emptiness of the Oklahoma prairie, Henson's haunting images of his landscape frequently startle in their poignancy.

the farms in oklahoma are old men
most with vacant eyes
waiting for messages
(“from a journal entry,” page 34)

in the field
i am calling toward a house
in which
no one lives
(“mistah,” page 22)

a white bird flies through the light of someone
missing
(“evening song,” page 32)

i am crossing
the same
endless
bridge
wrapped in
a strange garment
looking for
myself
(“seeing,” page 11)

Henson admits to no major influence on his work, but references in his poems to Tu Fu and Li Po and to haiku make clear

the impact of Chinese and Japanese poetry on his conception of the image. He also has acknowledged poems by various Spanish and American surrealists from which he has learned. The title of one poem, "song of myself" (page 13), suggests an awareness of Whitman. At any rate, when the poem is read in this light it suggests an ironic observation on Whitman's all-encompassing vision of self, America and humanity as a whole and on the long lines and great length of his "song." If Whitman would have us believe that he is speaking to the unborn generations, Henson is less expansive.

i am without an echo
 there is a small light
 like a whisper on the
 leaves
 and my love is in this
 place
 the ashes drift
 the rain runs through her
 laughter

And if Whitman at the end of his great poem lies confidently under the grass speaking to us through our boot-soles, Henson is

alone near the lake on a december
 night without
 a coat
 sipping
 coors
 and
 crow

But Henson's most successful poems, it seems to me, are those in which he discovers images which generate powerful feeling and reverberate with meaning and are at the same time related to the tradition and wisdom of the Cheyennes. The result is frequently a kind of remarkable symbiosis of the personal and the traditional, a process by which the poet receives power from his traditions while simultaneously enriching those traditions and helping to insure their survival.

A characteristic example of this is "impressions of the peyote

ritual" (pages 4–9), a series of six prayers which move from an initial invocation and a series of pleas ("heal us," "pity me / give me / light," "bring peace / to all cheyenne") through a statement of the solidarity of the communicants ("now we are one") and of the communicants with Maheo, the Cheyenne creator ("it is good to see you / sitting among them") to the final benediction ("our smoke has gone four ways / . . . keep us strong / to meet / the coming days").

Another example is Henson's homage to Dull Knife, who in 1878 led the pitiful remnant of his band in a courageous but doomed effort to break out of their confinement at Fort Robinson, Nebraska. Few of them survived.

in the wallow that morning with only scattered
rounds
not a word passed
yet
near the end the old women stopped chanting
lifting their broken hands they stood
listening it is said to the laughter of children
in the cold
howling
wind (page 21)

Henson makes us remember this tragedy, but he finds in tribal legend ("it is said") a remarkable note of hope—the laughter of children rising above the death chants of the old women and the sound of killing. That hope is reflected in the poem's title, "morning star," which was the name given to Dull Knife by the Cheyennes' Sioux allies. The purpose of such a poem, we must assume, is to reaffirm the indomitable spirit of the Cheyennes, and the juxtaposition of the scattered gunfire, the chanting of the old women, and the miraculous sound of the children's laughter in the wind, which affirms the truth that the Cheyenne will not die out after all, is powerful in its implications.

One of the risks run by a poet with a deep sense of identity with a tribe and a commitment to the perpetuation of that tribe's traditions is that the poems that result may fail to mean anything to anyone outside the tribe. Henson often uses Cheyenne words in his poems, particularly in his most recent work, *Another Song for America* (Norman, OK: Point Riders Press, 1987). Apparently

they possess for him an almost magical power to link him to the energy of his tribal tradition. He told Bruchac that he realized that his emphasis, sometimes obvious, often very subtle, on Cheyenne elements might not be understood outside the tribe but that he thought his poems were "evocative enough to start an interest" in non-Cheyenne readers (page 109). It seems to me that a strong case can be made for Henson's success in producing poems which link the tribal vision of the Cheyennes to the broader culture of America and indeed to universal human concerns. A splendid example of this success is the poem "we are a people" (page 20).

days pass easy over these ancient hills
i wander near a moccasin path overgrown with
rusted cans and weeds
i stand in the forest at sunset waiting for
a song from the rising wind
it is this way forever in this place
there is no distance between the name
of my race
and the owl calling
nor the badgers gentle plodding
we are a people born under symbols
that rise from the dust to touch us
that pass through the cedars where
our old ones sleep
to tell us of their dreams

It is not likely that any American Indian poet has more perfectly captured the sense of the vital relationship of the present to the past, of the individual to the tribe, and of the individual and the tribe to the natural world than Henson has done in this poem, and when we realize that he has done this with such scant materials the result seems even more miraculous. His crucial statement is that "the name of my race" and the sounds of the owl and the badger are all part of the same complex of sound, and when we consider what the Cheyennes call themselves in their own language we will see that the reference to "the name of my race" is the poem's Cheyenne center around which its meaning turns. The Cheyenne name for themselves is *Tsis tsis tas*, translated variously as "the people" or "the real people."

The title of the poem, "we are a people," means in a sense, therefore, that "We are Cheyennes," and the final statement ("we are a people born under symbols") means that to be a Cheyenne is to live in a vital relationship to a vast complex of symbolism that rises out of the very dust of the natural world and from the graves of the ancestors, who, in a sense, are still alive in the dreams they communicate to their living descendants. The hills, the forest, the sound of wind and owl and badger, the dreams of the old ones, earth and spirit, past and present, the speaker and his people, all are vitally related to each other in this extraordinary moment of perception.

Too often—at least too often for me—American Indian writers refer to the "Indian" way of looking at things as though it had absolutely nothing to do with anything known anywhere else in America, or even in the world. Altogether too often the implication of these remarks, even though they are frequently made by writers of mixed ancestry, is that it is all a matter of "blood"—a notion which surely any observer with no axe to grind will recognize as racist. Of course, there is something to the idea that the American Indian vision is special, and the truth in that vision is what is most important to a writer's tribal identity; but it also is true that the language of an entire generation of younger Indian poets is English, that much of their work, in spite of some claims to the contrary, does not remain outside major contemporary literary movements, and that the history of American literature for several generations has shown a remarkable reciprocity between the writings of Indians and those who have worked in America's "dominant culture." Non-Indian writers have been influenced by things Indian, Indian writers have been influenced by non-Indian writers while being a special part of the development of American culture as a whole, and the study of this interrelationship remains one of the most important tasks of scholarship in the field of Native American study.

And yet one of Bruchac's informants told him that much of her difficulty with writing derived from the English language, which, she said, is "a very materialistic and a very subject-oriented language," whereas the language of her tribe, which she admitted she did not know, "contains a more spiritual sense of the world." (The language of William Shakespeare and John Keats, or, for that matter, of Emily Dickinson and William Carlos Williams, is "materialistic"?) In any case, this poet went on, "Maybe that's why I write poetry . . ." (page 94). Considering that she

writes her poetry in English, it is difficult to know what to make of such a statement, and perhaps because it was made in conversation we should not treat it too roughly. But my point is that the confusion inherent here is inevitable if we do not assume that the greatest value of "Indian poetry," like that of poetry in general, is that it communicates visions that cross national, tribal, or personal boundaries. Poets do not sit around mumbling to themselves, and readers of poetry are by definition not people who are too stupid to think any "thoughts" but their own.

My point here is that Henson's vision in "we are a people" is one that is related to the cultural and personal predicament of all human beings, whether they know it or not. All of us, at least in our best moments, are "waiting for / a song from the rising wind," standing in the present, struggling to relate to the past and to our ancestors, living in a natural world to which we know we must relate; and none of us can be saved, or can save ourselves, except by the liberating power of language. The symbols "rise from the dust to touch us," and when we are not foolish we know that this is true.

Knowing this, we can only hope that Lance Henson will continue to speak of things Cheyenne and that he will never forget what his poetry so far reveals about those things—that they are most valuable for all of us when they most reveal the inherent wisdom of his forbears, who found their own special Cheyenne way of addressing the human problems which all of us, everywhere, must address.

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Wounds Beneath the Flesh: 15 Native American Poets. Edited by Maurice Kenny. Fredonia, N.Y.: White Pines Press, 1987. 49 pp. \$6.00 Paper.

Between Two Rivers: Selected Poems 1956–1984. By Maurice Kenny. Fredonia, N.Y.: White Pines Press, 1987. 168 pp. \$10.00 Paper.

Since the 1960s the "sanctioned" canon of American literature has expanded beyond narrow Anglo-American limits to include the "minority" writings of Blacks, Hispanics, Native Americans,