

## REVIEWS

Kimberly Blaeser. *Apprenticed to Justice*. Salt Publishing.

Reviewed by Tom Gannon

The first prose-poem episode of Kimberly Blaeser's "Two Oak Stories" involves an encounter with a red-tailed hawk. Its "glorious fan open," the bird unexpectedly becomes both the observed and the observer, as it "Corkscrews head; keeps me in sight. And I turn mine, pounding heart holding, hawk in my vision. Two watchers; some wordless exchange." A strange intercourse, this, and a strange story, but it is through just such moments of uncanny epiphany that Blaeser's new collection of poems, *Apprenticed to Justice*, offers the reader a marvelous apprenticeship in itself.

I turn first to Blaeser's many brilliant naturalist efforts in the poetry here, in which the spring is a Blakean return of delight, even for those of "us" humans who are able to "feast on each bright color / purple violets, golden crest / on the puffed breast of meadowlark, / who drink in every strut of turkey / each simmering warbler song" ("Stories of Fire"). Such passages are most copious in section 2, which might have simply been titled "Nature." Blaeser's own title, "That Which Refuses Pretension," is, in fact, pretty pretentious, but her point is that the lives and languages of other species transcend human hubris. If "So much talk today" is the subject of her poem "20 September," that discourse includes "even the tiniest triangles of bird's feet / sound[ing] autumn leaves." The "talk" continues, including the poet's acknowledgment of the limitations of human speech: "Now air holds bird song. Feathered voices so syncopated or symphonic, filled with rapid trills and climbing an impossible range. And I with only one voice box and one tongue" ("Listing Ecstatic"). This keynote poem from the section and collection proceeds to a French impressionist vision of "four goldfinches," envisioned as "Yellow and black flowers of the air planted here for this instant." But most wonderfully, the poet comes to a greater realization of her craft itself as an "ecological" endeavor, as an art "growing" out of the natural world: "Writing, I, too, curve myself into a vessel [like the plants, etc.], wear turning shades of wonder, strive to glisten—this small way." No pretension here, unless it is the very identification with the ecosphere itself, this (welcome, to my mind) erasure of borders between the human and nonhuman.

Nowhere is this merger more earnest than in her tribute to the loon, a border creature itself between water and air. The various descriptions of the bird in life and motion are well done—"Her white chest lifted from the water / wings spread and poised / on the loon edge of song dance or

flight" ("Boundaries")—but it is the final section, "Invocation," in which Blaeser reaches across "boundaries," across the borders of species: "Teach me now to hold myself on the brink / now to cry in wild echoing abandon / *Ahh-raw-rooooooooooooo*." No "small" sound, this, nor is it any longer entirely human, as the poem ends with (at least the hope for) an abandonment of human pretension—with a loon's wild yodel.

Like her Anishinaabe compatriot, Gerald Vizenor (whose work she has written on), Blaeser finds in the haiku form an apt model for her northwoods Native oral tradition. And a few of these nature paintings-in-motion, with their characteristically transformative third line, must be quoted entire: "Gelatin tadpoles / sprout legs one two three, now four. Tail / going-going—frog!"; "Northern follows jig / body flashes with strike, dive: / broken line floats up." My favorite, though, is the last of a haiku series called "Haiku Journey": "now one to seven / deer or haiku syllables / weave through winter trees." Just as the poet elsewhere becomes creative flowering plant or crying loon, here human discourse and the nonhuman world become *interwoven*, resulting in a fruitful "confusion," if you will.

Indeed, in contrast to some of the more straightforward tours de force of literary naturism quoted above, Blaeser's most characteristic act of imagination is ultimately one of *derealization*, whether a simple perceptual illusion or a wholesale erasure (or merger) of ontological identity and epistemological categories. Thus the question, in "Some Kind of Likeness," whether the narrator is really seeing a bird wing or a piece of tree bark, becomes fodder for phenomenological oscillation, as she perceives "wing, wood, wing, wood, wing—back and forth. The grey shape . . . hovering like bird or bark on the edge of realities." Likewise, in "The Spirit of Matter," a "nesting box" and "bird" are similarly (near willfully) perceptually conflated, until, by poem's end, the ostensibly simple line, "Shore birds standing still as matter," resonates as something far more than blithe simile; rather, the reader is "apprenticed" into considerations of the possible erasure of our cognitive distinctions between vital life and "dead" matter, between the animate and inanimate.

This motif of merger becomes more ambitious in later poems, in which the very "land" and "sky / meet," in which the poet comes to that "lonely moment / when they become indistinguishable / dusk and day blending one into another / until the division between land and sky falls away" ("Seasonal"). The "Refractions" of light and rock and water in the poem of that title create a similar "unfolding mirror image . . . until, in that moment, I forget / which side of vision / is mere reality." And that is the point, after all, a deconstruction of all "sides," and at last a merger into the One. This gesture is best expressed in another such vision: the horizon at dusk here becomes a "border [that] still shimmers, / and this truant halo lingers // where onejoinsanother / where visionoverlap / where lives come together" ("Grace of Crossings"). (Stylistically apt, then, is this passage's *joining* of its very words.) Finally, Blaeser admits in a particularly powerful passage from another poem ("Told at Beartooth in July") that

such gestures may be dangerously irrational in their erasure of identity, of even anthropocentrism: "Who would take that step / just beyond sense"? Well—"We all take it in our mind. . . . landing perhaps / in another geography / or falling / swallowed by another dark / redrawn body. // This one feathered / black, sleek / as crow or story. . . ." But this corvid-trickster disintegration of borders, of human versus nonhuman identity, is also a liberation, like the poet's loon cry, or her weaving of "haiku syllables" like "deer"—a heady "apprenticeship," indeed.

Blaeser's hallmark erasure of borders and merging of identities is equally evident in the other main subject of these poems, all of the poet's "relations" in a human sense, from her immediate family and relatives, to her White Lake Ojibwe tribe, to the oppressed of the world, especially women and children—all of whose "lives come together" via the poet's all-engaging empathy. The reader is always aware of Blaeser's Native heritage in these poems, be they negative memories from history, of "the loss of a generation / limbo Indians turned to alcohol" and of "Indian dreams for justice stillborn these many generations"; be they positive contemporary acts of cultural continuity (e.g., "the moccasin pat jingle tap women" and "turtle rattle ankle bell men" of "This Dance"); or be they moments of sheer slapstick humor, like "the time our elected [tribal] chair / mistakenly and under the influence of civilization / drove his pickup down the railroad tracks / and made the tri-state ten o'clock news" ("Goodbye to All That").

Among the highlights of this collection are the many precious character sketches of people Blaeser has known personally, especially the old men and old women who were no doubt instrumental in fostering her own twinkle-in-the-eye *à rebours* view of the world. The several positive father-figures are especially charming, including "A Boxer Grandfather"—"whose wrinkled boxer hands / opened to unveil Juicy Fruit, nickels and dimes"—and the old fellow of "The Womanless Wedding": "the man who fed me Rocky Mountain oysters / and gave my dog beer." Memorable, too, is another "man" in her life, her son with whom she skips stones in "Memories of Rock."

And yet, understandably, female elders receive the greater bulk of praise in these poems, from the "hunched and soundless old women" in general to the two old "Shadow Sisters," whose two lives—or rather, one life, it seems—are delineated in incredibly moving detail. Indeed, feminism is a crucial aspect of Blaeser's political agenda, which includes a reexamination of our dominant cultural enterprises through a female eye: "If science and technology are the answers / who have we hired to ask the questions? / And what was it you said about *women's work*?" ("Dictionary for a New Century"). Redefined, a "woman's work," then, is to ask *different* "questions."

Blaeser's political activism comes to the fore in section 4 ("No Telling"), the subject of which might be nutshellled as "let's stand up for women & children (of color)." A caveat: these are admittedly the most didactic poems of the collection. However, these are also the collection's most "important" (and most anthology-worthy) poems—because of, for

better or worse, their very "agenda" of repriviling the underdogs of gender and ethnicity. For instance, her poem in honor of an activist Latina teacher ("Who Talks Politics") pulls no punches in "talking politics," in applauding the educator's message "that even the poor have choices / that strong dark women can stamp out pathways / in the mud black alleys / of race hatred and cultural bias." "The Things I Know" is her own poetic pedagogy for a class of Native students, the main learning outcome of which is to "run" beyond current cultural-historical confines: "to run . . . farther than crooked lines of type / on treaty documents / beyond the erasures of culture"; "to run past the language banks / of stereotypes: Hiawatha, Pocahontas, Geronimo, / to run past the stolen medals / of the Sac and Fox Jim Thorpe / still running into history bereft." (Oh!)

Native youth are championed again in the most timely poem of the collection, "Red Lake." Yes, this school shooting received some national publicity, but when compared to Columbine? "When bullets sink into the flesh / of children, / color still matters"; for "even death / has a pecking order" in "An America / who speaks this name / *Red Lake* / like an ethnic slur." In sum, the event at the white middle-class Colorado high school was a tragic horror; the Minnesota reservation school incident was, apparently, just "Indians being Indians." The longest and most ambitious poem of this section, "Housing Conditions of One Hundred Fifty Chippewa Families," deals with her home Minnesota reservation (White Lake) and offers an ingenious extended critique of the whole discourse of anthropologists and sociologists studying Native Americans. A Native rereading of the "facts" in a Catholic nun's 1938 sociological treatise on this reservation, the poem forever turns the scientific observer's cultural biases against her, including a final subversion of those high Anglo-sociological standards, "standards against which all our measurements / fall short, become sub—sub-standard, sub-human. / You left[,] Mary Inez, the Latin Mass / and rosary zipped safely in one pocket— / the names of each Midē wiwin elder / drumming and chanting in the other." On one level, that second pocket is a further act of containment and appropriation; but one might also read this coda as Sister Mary having unknowingly "gone a little Native" herself, having spent so much time among the people and the land.

The final section is about death, or at least most of the poems are, but the last (and title) poem of the book is, ironically or appropriately, about life and return, of the "drumming and chanting" that the good nun couldn't forget. As the book's concluding anchor piece, it rebels once again against "this [Native] history / of loss," and prophesies a latter-day Ghost Dance of sorts: "this old earth erupts. / Medicine voices rise like mists / white buffalo memories . . . tremble into wholeness." Fittingly, the very "Nature" of the collection's earlier poems returns in earnest here, most notably in the final extended trope of a woodpecker's drumming. Yes, the past several centuries have been largely an indigenous waning and disappearance, as heartbeats and drums hammered "the woodpecker sound / of an old retreat." But that sound is now reinscribed as a

new insistent hammering: "And we turn this sound / over and over again / until it becomes / fertile ground / from which we will build / new nations / upon the ashes of our ancestors. / Until it becomes / the rattle of a new revolution. . . ." At last, the collection's dialectic is clear and no doubt intentional, from the unassuming "small way" of the early naturist poems and personal character sketches—of the natural world's "minor" voices and the Native characters' muted lives—to a much louder and in-your-face hue and cry, on the part of both Nature and Native. The apprenticeship has now been completed.

Enid Shomer. *Tourist Season*. Random House.

Reviewed by Erin Flanagan

In her latest story collection, *Tourist Season*, Enid Shomer turns the shuffling image of the Florida retiree on its ear, replacing it with the often-hilarious truths of what happens to people who—with so much life under their belts—begin to topple both forward and backward. Many of these stories reveal how the memories and decisions of a life long lived can shape us from childhood to old age and offer a glimpse into what happens when our past lives catch up with our present selves.

In the opening story "Chosen," past lives is meant quite literally. Two messengers from Tibet are sent to Iris Hornstein's home to inform her she is the reincarnation of the holy Saint Amarjampa. Accompanied by her husband and her own skepticism, Iris travels with them to Tibet for training and enlightenment—a tall order for a Jewish woman from Florida who doesn't believe in reincarnation. Haunting the story are Iris's great aunt Tanta and her cousin Alta, two women with very different ideas of faith. Tanta is a teacher pretending to know less than she does, while Alta flits from belief to belief, landing briefly on mysticism before moving to kitchen appliances. During her training, Iris becomes impatient, although her messengers assure her "you do not have to think you are wise to be wise." The story ends with the Hornsteins back in Florida, Iris's aides Lu and Wangrit still accompanying her. The men, Americanized in their own ways but still believers, have become comfortable companions for Iris, along with the memories of her aunt and cousin. In the end, we see an acceptance of all beliefs in a world big enough to accommodate them, with an added understanding that what makes something true isn't what we think but the power of someone to believe it. In the final paragraph, Shomer writes,

Iris gazed at the Florida sky, which was pale compared to the intense, deep blue of Tibet. She knew the difference had to do with the high altitude. Tibetan air was so thin that early explorers claimed to have seen the stars at noon from the highest peaks. But these accounts, like the reports of temples made of solid gold and sightings of Yeti, the Himalayan Bigfoot, turned out to be travelers' tales. (27)

Like the opening "Chosen," many of the stories revolve around women who are of retirement age, trying to piece together a new identity when the one they held has become obsolete, proving that aging can be a struggle, a rebellion, a blessing, and a betrayal. Frieda, the protagonist of the title story, struggles to negotiate the world as someone perceived as old, an obstacle course she's handling more smoothly than her husband is:

Inside she was twenty. She was twenty in her passion about landfills, African desertification, dolphins, the shrinking gene pool of food grains, the world her grandchildren would inherit. In her water aerobics class she *felt* twenty. There, three afternoons a week, nearly weightless in her foam Aquajogger belt, she floated standing up in the deep end and ran and ran, the jewel-clear turquoise water spreading out in ripples around her like applause.

But Milt wasn't twenty or thirty. He was seventy-two. Not because he took beta-blockers and his knees were gone and he could turn his neck in only one direction. But because out of the blue he'd say things like, "The ambulance will be coming for me one of these nights." (80)

Like Frieda, many of the characters are growing older and realizing that the person they married is not necessarily the person they are now compatible with years later. These characters' lives are riddled with divorces, past careers, and former lives, showing that the more baggage you've got, the harder it is to fit comfortably in your newly renovated role. But even poor, hobbling Milt with his bad knees isn't as uncomplicated as he first appears. He tells Frieda, "I feel like I'm being turned into something I'm not. That's it!" he said, struck with insight. "I used to be treated like a man—with respect, a little fear even. Now people treat me like an old douche bag."

The surprise in this story comes through Irv and Belle, another elderly couple residing in their condo complex. Irv seems to be the most decrepit among them, his body failing and his mind following. At the end it's revealed that even in this state, he and Belle have found a way to continue their lives and pleasures. Through this, Frieda finds hope that Milt will return to her, realizing, like Irv, that there's a drastic difference between old and dead.

Although many of Shomer's protagonists are retirement-age women, two stories center on Garland, a teenager who shows that being young is no picnic either. In these stories, Shomer weaves together two of her major themes—confession and forgiveness, and the effect of past decisions and their repercussions. "Sweethearts" tells the story of Garland's affair with Clarence, the Tupelo County sheriff, a relationship that of course takes a nasty turn. But it's the ending—with Garland's housekeeper—that refocuses the story for the reader, as she offers Garland what she needs: unconditional love. "Fill in the Blank" gives us the New York Garland—the one who's supposedly put that ugly business in "Sweethearts" behind her—a girl who robs a physical therapy office with her new friend Linda. As the guilt begins to eat away at Linda, she ends her friendship