

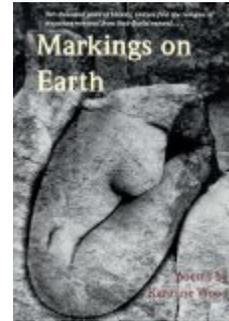
H-Net Reviews

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Karenne Wood. *Markings on Earth*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2001. x + 75 pp. \$14.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8165-2165-4.

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Bearing Witness and Offering Some Redemption

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As a collection, *Markings on Earth* demonstrates considerable stylistic unity. Although the subject matter of individual poems ranges from meditations on the natural world to an unflinching look at both cultural and personal wounds, the voice is consistently lyrical and elegiac.

Karenne Wood offers her readers a journey that talks of the past, of conflict and the spiritual alchemy of existence. This collection begins ambitiously with a poem titled "Directions." Although a chant-like piece speaking of the four directions borders on cliché, the precision of the language cannot be denied, nor can the visionary power of lines like: "We, who cannot stay here/ forever, read the cliff's face/ where our ancestors wrote to us,/ pictures in ocher."

In the first section, "Blue Mountains," Wood elegantly connects painful Native histories to the natural world. Grief does not die with the bodies of those that have been wronged—those who are sensitive can feel the past documented in a cliff's face, in wind, in dust, and in the sunlight. One of the more successful examples of this experience occurs in "Site of a Massacre." This poem directly asks the readers to expand their consciousness and not simply see an ordinary field, but to take in the images of "the barefoot dead" and "the children collapsing,/ limp spattered dolls in the/ center of a village on fire" (p. 20). In lines ironically reminiscent of Walt Whitman, the poem concludes by stating that in "the wind,/ each blade

of grass is screaming" (p. 20). As Whitman proclaims in *Leaves of Grass*, "For every atom belonging to me, as good belongs to you." Wood also hammers home the point that we are all connected and those who have suffered injustice will not be forgotten.

Other poems, such as "Oronoco" and "Amorolek's Words," take a more literal approach to recounting the events of the past by examining topics such as the greed behind the cultivation of tobacco, or the arrival of John Smith in America. Although there are few poems with a light-hearted tone in this collection, "My Standard Response" playfully and successfully responds to stereotypes of Native Americans. Brief, lyrical pieces such as "Great Blue Herons," "Spider Dance," and "The Raccoon" remind us of our origins in the natural world. These clear snapshots transcend the moment described and are more about connection than simple observation.

Karenne Wood takes risks in this collection and the greater the stakes are for this poet, the more powerful and precise the use of description and metaphor becomes. Emotional risk is particularly evident in the second section titled "Hard Times," which is littered with characters who battle with deep loss, desperation, addiction, and abuse. The title poem concentrates on a woman whose "hands have scrubbed cities of floors, washed/ the nameless dead" but "failed to protect her or any of her children" (p. 33). This poem introduces the idea that the grief of a lifetime can hardly be contained in something as delicate as skin. In "For My Ex-Husband," the narrator discloses

the slow progression of abuse that eventually led her to wander the world “as one among/ the bony women who walked out of Dachau/ wondering what I should do with the/ shreds of woman left through every long/ day that would follow, now that I could choose” (pp. 40-41). These poems contain authentic sentiment, but they are tough, well constructed, and not a bit sentimental.

The final section contains several poems that examine death and dying. “First Light” answers the questions posed in this section by stating, “[a]t the end, we become what we have/ loved, each thing that transfixed us in

the rapture of its moment, its grace of its own making, ours the same.” All of the beauty and terror examined in subsequent poems is unified in the idea that the light of dawn shines upon every living creature and this “light of the world” is worth believing in. Ultimately, the poems in this collection enunciate a oneness with the natural world, witness acts of beauty and brutality, and offer up moments of wisdom casually, even conversationally. Whether Wood talks of failed relationships, torn communities, or moments of healing, her readers will not fail to admire the potent, honest writing in this collection of poems.

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