

WHEN MY BROTHER WAS AN AZTEC BY NATALIE DIAZ



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About the Author

Natalie Diaz: Natalie Diaz was born and raised on the Fort Mojave Indian Reservation in Needles, California. Having played professional basketball for four years in western Europe and Asia, Diaz returned to the states to complete her MFA at Old Dominion University in 2007. She has received the Nimrod/Hardman Pablo Neruda Prize and her work has appeared in numerous journals and magazines, including *Prairie Schooner*, *Nimrod International*, and *North American Review*. She lives in Surprise, Arizona.

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"I write hungry sentences," Natalie Diaz once explained in an interview, "because they want more and more lyricism and imagery to satisfy them." This debut collection is a fast-paced tour of Mojave life and family narrative: A sister fights for or against a brother on meth, and everyone from Antigone, Houdini, Huitzilopochtli, and Jesus is invoked and invited to hash it out. These darkly humorous poems illuminate far corners of the heart, revealing teeth, tails, and more than a few dreams.

I watched a lion eat a man like a piece of fruit, peel tendons from fascia like pith from rind, then lick the sweet meat from its hard core of bones. The man had earned this feast and his own deliciousness by ringing a stick against the lion's cage, calling out Here, Kitty Kitty, Meow!

With one swipe of a paw much like a catcher's mitt with fangs, the lion pulled the man into the cage, rattling his skeleton against the metal bars.

The lion didn't want to do it—
He didn't want to eat the man like a piece of fruit and he told the crowd this: I only wanted some goddamn sleep . . .

Natalie Diaz was born and raised on the Fort Mojave Indian Reservation in Needles, California. After playing professional basketball for four years in Europe and Asia, Diaz returned to the states to complete her MFA at Old Dominion University. She lives in Surprise, Arizona, and is working to preserve the Mojave language.

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A Wonderful Book of Poetry

By Richard Martin

The opening poem of the collection sets up what is to follow. Diaz discusses the drug addiction her brother faces and the effect it has had upon her parents and their family dynamic. Mojave and Spanish words and phrases are scattered throughout the lines, harking to the culture within her home. The poem is shocking: "My brother shattered and quartered them before his basement festivals--/waved their shaking hearts in his fists,/while flea-ridden dogs ran up and down the steps, licking their asses,/turning tricks." The poems that follow look closer at the canvas on which Diaz has chosen to paint.

The collection is split into three parts. The first takes the reader through familial, cultural, and historical contexts in which Diaz has plausibly found herself.

"The Red Blues" speaks of the oppression the Mojave people, and the greater Native American population, has experienced in the past. It brings the Mojave's struggles into focus, and leaves little room for apology. Instead, the poem seems to search for something more.

"Reservation Mary" explains what life could have been like for Diaz, if her basketball career had been interrupted by the birth of a child. It may even divulge the life of someone Diaz knows.

"The Last Mojave Indian Barbie" takes a satirical lens to the cultural pressures and expectations of Native American woman. It is also one of the most peculiar poems in the first section because of it looks and reads like prose. The semantic play and musical moments hint at a poetic desire, but never quite bring the reader to a place to accept the work as poetry. This piece shows that Diaz is not afraid to push the boundaries of what makes a poem.

The second part of the collection takes the context in which it has been placed and focuses on the family, and the relational destruction Diaz's brother creates. All eleven poems delve into the trauma of addiction and the havoc it can raise. The poems often focus on her mother or father's reaction to her brother. This is the case in the opening poem: "She asked, What are you on? Who wants to kill you?/The sky wasn't black or blue but the green of dying night./The devil does. Look at him, over there./He pointed to the corner house./The sky wasn't black or blue but the dying green of night." Lines such as these, result in deeply impactful poems that cling to the skin.

Diaz continues to push the definition of poetry with the exploration of poetic prose, free verse, and listings in "My Brother Named Gethsemane", "As a Consequence of My Brother Stealing All the Lightbulbs", and "Formication". She also begins some of her poems with dedications, quotations, and definitions. In these ways, Diaz makes her anthology friendlier to those not used to reading poetry. The familiar forms and conventions of literature create a more welcoming landscape for frightened readers.

Finally, Diaz brings the reader to a deeply personal space. The poems of the third section seem to feed off Diaz's own experience outside of the reservation. We are sent out from a now familiar world into the unknown. What we encounter is confusing, harsh, and uncertain at times.

"When the Beloved asks, 'What Would You Do If You Woke Up and I Was a Shark?'" brings forth strange images of early mornings, death and morphing into marine life all in the context of a common experience.

Diaz drags you into an unfamiliar world and builds context around you, allowing the reader to experience a portion of the complicated and diverse story of the Native American people. The honesty she gives makes these poems deeply impactful and terribly difficult to forget, even though you may want to. Their jaws will never let go.

5 of 5 people found the following review helpful.

Fantastic!!!

By eleanor andrews

This is not only incredible poetry, but it speaks to the heart of being Native American and the experiences of the indigenous people of this country. The poems touched my heart with their honesty and knowledge of the

reality of the author's experience - which has been shared and is being shared by so many. Thank you so much, Natalie Diaz!

5 of 5 people found the following review helpful.

Great book

By Venge

Profound and strange, but also clear and narrative in places. Lots of heartbreak, but moving and contemplative things to say about it. I taught the book in a graduate seminar and they all loved it and thanked me for introducing them to this poet.

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