Denise Sweet. *Palominos Near Tuba City.* Holy Cow! Press, 2018. 75 pp. ISBN: 9780998601045
http://www.deesweet.com/

> *"…would I run again and again to return where my education would unfold in seasons, within harvested stories?"*
>
> - Denise Sweet, "Mapping the Land"

Denise Sweet must surely have been born a storyteller poet and expressed herself in that way from the time she could speak. *Palominos Near Tuba City* is a collection of forty new and selected poems that spans the decades of her life as a recognized, published poet. Sweet, an Ojibwe of White Earth, Minnesota, has lived and experienced societal / historical changes of the 1970s through today. Her latest work, published twenty years after Sweet's acclaimed *Songs for Discharming,* is a mature collection that includes very recent poems as well as some from early publications. In the time between the two books Sweet has been Wisconsin's Poet Laureate, a professor, a mother and grandmother, a traveler to many parts of the world. And a poet who lives her work.

The poetry in this collection includes global as well as tribal and regional topics that are at their heart traditional Ojibwe ways of looking at the world, time-honored teaching and passing on of knowledge that has reinforced generations of learning and recounting history. The number four, significant in Ojibwe culture (there are four seasons, four directions, four races of mankind), is present in the organization of the collection into four sections: "Mapping the Land," "The Strangers," "Rough Rock," and "Homing In." As a contemporary Ojibwe poet Sweet expresses in her writing the observations, consideration and recording / recounting of the world around her in a fashion that is literary and historical as well as uniquely Ojibwe; as we read her poetry we become a part of this. For readers unfamiliar with some of the Ojibwe language and terms in the poems she has provided a glossary at the beginning of the book.

"Mapping the Land," the poem that begins the lyrical story that is this collection, allows us into Sweet's interactions with an elderly Native man who as a child attended the Indian boarding school in Tomah, Wisconsin; it is this relationship that sets the tone of the book. "Like the back of your hand … you learn the land by feel" he begins, and then, spitting chew occasionally into a five-pound coffee can, voices the story that he chooses to tell Sweet on that day and at that time, in the speaking style of an Ojibwe old-timer, an elder. A generation behind him, she thinks hard as he talks of being sent away from home to the boarding school in Tomah, the lay of the land familiar after several attempts at running away, and the triumph of making it "home in a week by sunrise! Every time! They'd never catch us!" He teases her about running as a sport; she ponders the aspects of relays, marathons, treadmills, of running just to run, "with no destination, no purpose," unlike the old man's stories. Looking directly at her, which is what an old-time Ojibwe man would do when making an important point, he tells Sweet that he never finished 7th grade, which opens her thoughts to the profound differences in their generational experiences – Could she have survived what the old man survived? If she had succeeded, would her education be that of Ojibwe people of earlier generations, learned in stories and in an existence in rhythm

with the seasons? And what, in spite or because of the privileges, gains and advantages, material and otherwise of our own lives that are so different from the old man's, have we descendants of those boarding school children and that era missed? With the wistfulness and guilt familiar to those of us who have touched and loved that earlier generation, she tells the reader, "The sudden twist of regret hung in the air between us. I hardly knew what to say -- "

It is easy to picture Sweet re-living the time spent with the old man as she organized her work in this collection; this reviewer, a longtime admirer of her work, did just that. Although each poem can stand alone, all can be read within the context of the first, which reinforces Sweet's awareness of earlier generations, how the lives of those generations touch hers. The experiences of our ancestors and ourselves, and what we have made of those experiences, will touch the lives of our descendants, a concept that Sweet applies to much, if not all, of her writing.

Some of the poetry in the collection uncovers intrigues and wonders woven throughout everyday happenings: an assertion of female spirit and knowledge playfully written in "Zen and Women's Way of Parking"; a conversation with Sweet's mother closing a circular conversation of flippancy and contempt halted by an enlightenment, the mother's comments resulting in an awareness of generations of womanhood and a paired weeping of mother and daughter; in a shoulder-to-shoulder sharing with Bea Medicine what it takes to be an ikwe (woman) warrior in "At the Women's Studies Conference (for Bea Medicine)" in a setting where Native women were being treated less than respectfully by non-Native women; in rising to correct, Medicine strengthens and empowers Sweet and all Native women. This circularity, evident in so many of Sweet's poems, is particularly biting in "Indian War," a bitter touching on the wounds and sores of history as she watches sports on television, mascots in "turkey feathers and greasepaint grins" ignorantly mimicking "Indians, the ones you honor at half-time." In two other pieces Sweet places herself into the personae of Osama Bin Laden, Injun' Joe, villains who would but cannot find salvation and redemption in the love of their wives. Many poems address earthly climate and terrain, tribal connection and spiritual disconnect, and the role of the poet-observer, which is to mold language into a link between beings and earth; to love and protect; and, as it is in traditional Ojibwe pedagogy, to witness and teach with the power of words. There is at times an atmosphere of sorrow and helplessness at the plight of the Earth and the possibilities of destruction, but never hopelessness. As the words of traditional Ojibwe elders / storytellers / educators provide wise direction for what is currently in our hands and will pass to the future, so does Sweet's poetry in *Palominos Near Tuba City.*

Linda LeGarde Grover. University of Minnesota Duluth

Works Cited

Sweet, Denise. *Songs for Discharming*. Greenfield Review, 1997.