Indigenous
The beauty of this collection of poems is the way it uses every device capable of reaching the reader: starkly intense, almost confrontational black-and-white photographs; language that is at once direct yet deliberately not conversational; meter that invites ritual gestures; and verbal images that transport the reader to another time and culture. The result is a riveting immersion in all of what the term “indigenous” implies, with its suggestion of history—and time beyond, in a history with which few of us are familiar enough.

These poems go behind the familiar: Wounded Knee, the Trail of Tears, figures such as Sequoyah and Chief Joseph; past the artifacts, legends, and folkways encountered through reading and travels across America, to the intimate details of a specific family and their lives and world seen from the inside. These poems manage to braid together the members and traditions of a living family with the history of a country created, by force and guile, not in an empty wilderness awaiting discovery, but in a space teeming with viable nations in possession of arts, languages, customs, governments, and religions of their own. They give, as our literature seldom does, moral weight to the real and living representatives of those nations, rather than to the romanticized or demonized figures imagined by film.

They are important because they do what poetry does perhaps better than anything else: say what most of us find hardest to say about ourselves and our circumstances, not in political or sociological terms, but in the stories we tell ourselves in the solitude of our thought. And Reeser has clearly thought hard about the difficulty of keeping, at great personal cost—or even wanting to keep—an identity that complicates life; the importance of preserving our own names; the conflicted relationships between minorities and the majority, and among minorities struggling to advance; the ambivalent role of religion, and the ambiguity with which the faith of the majority may appeal to, but also repel, the descendants of people converted against their will. Some of the most moving poems in this collection are essentially highly original prayers, or warnings against Christianity issued by proudly resistant elders, or
expressions of genuine devotion salted with ironic and clear-eyed disillusion.

Some few among the poems touch upon such relatively recent experiences as fighting in Vietnam as an American soldier, but bearing an indigenous name that recalls the Asian origin of Amerindian peoples. In “Thunderbird,” a veteran’s son recalls his father’s military service this way:

The Phan Rang fields first heard my foreign birth from helicopters hovering over Vietnam.

Another, “White Pocahontas,” describes the unease of a mixed couple out for an evening together, attracting curious and probably hostile attention in a public place. And still others identify the poet’s family members, in terms impossible not to recognize as one’s own—universal—in the photographs that add so much to this document.

In all, Indigenous is more than simply a good read, or a compelling account of events we need to know better: it’s an addition to our national literature by an accomplished poet who knows, and understands intimately, what she is so generously sharing in her work.

— Rhina P. Espaillat, author of And After All

Jennifer Reeser’s new book of poems, Indigenous, provokes a strange sensation in the reader: an alien yet familiar landscape peopled with recurring characters, the mingling ghosts of history haunting the here and now and reanimating the myth and lore of her folk, both tragic and comic—as inseparable from Reeser’s imagination as they are from her blood. Each poem enters into dialogue with the reader even as it maintains an ongoing conversation of sound and sense with the other poems in the collection, a steady, sturdy examination of essential tensions: what it means to be a
descendant of the First Nations, an heir to Christian grace, and a poet writing in modern American.

“Poetry,” Seamus Heaney says, “... whether it belongs to an old political dispensation or aspires to express a new one, has to be a working model of inclusive consciousness. It should not simplify. Its projections and inventions should be a match for the complex reality which surrounds it and out of which it is generated.” This seems right, and Jennifer Reeser’s Indigenous affirms its rightness not because her book is a grand manifesto on inclusiveness for its own sake, but because Reeser the poet seeks to be true to her poems as poetry, even as Reeser the person seeks to be true to the instincts, memories, heartbreaks, and victories that first gave rise to the poems:

But I— I will return to water, lettuce,
And vinegar, to sassafras and pepper,
And treaties signed by those with little English,
But whose inherent language is forgotten
And bids me to recall and resurrect it.

Measured syllables and tribal pulses punch back and forth throughout Reeser’s newest collection of verse. Already a master of poetic forms, Reeser has reapplied her talent in what amounts to a major development in her repertoire, bringing the reader to that Native American borderland of the heart that has apparently been a major part of her life, but a part we’ve only seen in glimpses up to now. Upon engaging the poems of Indigenous, the reader crosses into that borderland with English rhymes and Western meters serving as our compass points. The reader experiences the psychological landscape of Indigenous through the same flint-cut purity of style that has defined Reeser’s poetry since An Alabaster Flask first appeared a decade and a half ago.

Reeser has always had a keen ability to lead us through her poetry to show us not only what to see but also how to look. Indigenous
gives us a fresh set of tracks; each poem on the page leads us out beyond ourselves, enticing with equal parts confidence and risk, generosity and endurance. Reeser repurposes the sonnet to prevail and multiply throughout Indigenous as a studied and pensive series of interrelated cantos celebrating her Native American legacy. A villanelle in Reeser’s hands becomes a bittersweet dirge for what is lost; and a rondeau explodes with a new pattern of colors as a dance of joy for all that can and (if Jennifer Reeser has anything to do with it) will be rescued, retained and—like the poems that make up Indigenous—remembered for years to come.

— Joseph O’Brien, poetry editor of the San Diego Reader
In devoted memory
of my beloved grandfather,
Claude Griffin
C.G.
“Monk” Maiden

Do na da go buhn i
Lambda En

—I will see you again
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Indigenous
I. The Ancients
Enigma

Grandfather works his crosswords at the table,
While I—distracted from my Aesop fable—
Attempt to guess his task, but am unable.

The cuckoo clock above him, on the eights,
Keeps rhythmic timing, lifting pinecone weights
Of lead chains, while the bird bursts through its gates.

I grimace at the grinding of the lead.
The salmon walls behind his vivid, red
Complexion glow around his coal-black head.

Black glasses rim the ears. He boasts a shave
As close as that of some ancestral brave
Whose notice the unmarried maidens crave.

I finish “reading,” wait for him to say
My name in that peculiar, rasping way
I hear inside my own head, to this day,

Too young to recognize or understand
The motive for these motions of his hand,
Or what the puzzle architects have planned;

While Jesus—blond and white—elicits feeling,
Portrayed in paint, perpetually kneeling
Beside His rock, gaze raised up to the ceiling.
But Grandfather keeps his silence, like a hawk
Prepared to swoop. This is his daily walk
Of mind, away from sound, and idle talk.

Befitting a stern man of humble means,
His typic meal of cucumber, cornbread, beans,
And coffee waits, beside seed magazines.

The pieces of his verbal puzzle dance
Invisibly—no mindless game of chance—
To Perry Como’s lyrics of romance

Or captured, falling stars, in easy pitch.
A tall, plaid thermos meets his knee, from which
Throughout the day, he pours the liquid rich

With bitter chicory, filling the inside
Of hefty cups—substantial, shallow, wide
And white as the adornments of a bride.

And I am mesmerized. I cannot tear
My eyes away from his un-graying hair,
Bowed over this obsession we both share.

Though, if I were to turn aside and look,
Examining each corner, every nook
And walnut shelf, to open every book,
His signature—in black ink—would appear:
Diagonal initials, in a tier
Would mark the published annals of each year;

The illustrated dictionaries sold
One hundred years within the past, so old
I fear the leaves would not survive a fold;

His cherished Zane Grey novels, strangely sketched
With noble native heroes, would be etched,
Across each flyleaf, eloquently stretched—

Possessive to a startling degree.
He finishes his challenge, finally,
And offers his warm coffee cup to me.

His grip allows not one drop to be spilt.
His black eyes—fierce in youth—enlarge and tilt.
I rise without reluctance from my quilt.

His fingertips smell mildly of ink.
Dust motes revolve around him, glowing pink.
To draw his spirit into mine, I drink.
Not Stifled by the Ground

“Take care,” you told my father, “of my girls,”
Mere moments from the time you would depart.
To think on it, the melancholy curls
Like vapor in the lungs, to choke my heart.
Administering, though, that admonition,
Before the man you came to call your son
Despite so little time, a new tradition
Began from you—and not the only one.
But when you slipped from that hospital room,
You did not realize, your spoken pearl
Would be repeated, to my waiting groom,
Who then would pass it on, for my own girl.
For centuries to come, let it resound,
Your voice not stifled—ever—by the ground.
FNU: First Name Unknown

Native American Female, Unknown Name
Eight generations ago was my great grand dame,

There in a line I assumed to be whiter than snow:
English and Scottish were evident. Powhatan? No.

Told of the presence of this unpredicted Dark Horse,
Rather than standing in awe, I acknowledge, of course.

Savage and strange as the Jamestown address, and vague years—
Hundreds between us—arises the family name: Spears.

Paper Doll Powhatan, comes the unfortunate phrase—
Firm in my thinking, firm as far off are the days;

Joining the ranks of the ancients and modern ones, those
Nobles and commoners both, who revive and make rose

Feeling and face at the same time, without and within,
Feeding the bloom of my spirit, with that of my skin.

Holding this mystery intimately, I sigh, “Ho,
Here is a Maiden of meaning—my white buffalo.”

Native American Female, First Name Unknown:
Rare, in her line; now, inside me, and never alone.
One Un-delayed Way

A cretic hymn entirely in Cherokee sounds

Smoky meats stowed away
Long ago, making you
Slow, you go loading hay—
Neatly, mutely—duty due.

What a day! What loosed heat!
Oh—(ha!)—not one young, wee
Yew was cut. Loading wheat
Late, you quote Donne to me.

Unseen neigh, unknown squeal
Take you home—healing, low—
Who won’t see, who won’t steal,
Who won’t lay you to woe.

Oak one day may, too, one
Un-delayed way, no yaw
Taking you, lost, to none—
Squat to eat, soon to gnaw.