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The Woman in Red by Cynthia Hogue, and: *Going Home Away
Indian* by Leo Romero (review)

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Western American Literature, Volume 26, Number 4, Winter 1992, pp. 373-374
(Review)

Published by University of Nebraska Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/wal.1992.0146>

Western
American
Literature

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WAL 26(4) 373-374
THE UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA PRESS

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The Woman in Red. By Cynthia Hogue. (Boise, Idaho: Ahsahta Press at Boise State University, 1989. 51 pages, \$4.95.)

Going Home Away Indian. By Leo Romero. (Boise, Idaho: Ahsahta Press at Boise State University, 1990. 103 pages, \$4.95.)

These two recent publications by Ahsahta Press could not be more different, which I mean as a tribute to the publisher. Fortunately, clone poetry (or what Donald Hall has dubbed "The McPoem") is not (yet) universally sought.

Cynthia Hogue's poems are rooted not in place so much as in the interior spaces where relationships have been. While small-town America and the family tribe figure in many of these poems, they also evoke a universalized place where what is significant is what has been lost there and what may perhaps be retrieved. In the attempt to make tangible the ineffable, Hogue's work is reminiscent of Tess Gallagher's best poetry, in which psychological states are deftly dramatized.

Hogue's "Of Winter The Picture" quite effectively conjures the distance between speaker and lost lover. Coming across a picture taken by the lover—of fuchsia sky behind hills—the speaker resurrects another scene about which the ex-lover knew nothing, a futile search into twilight for her wounded collie, which brings her back full circle to the same sky and the picture: "I trace the trees—their winter branches/fretting a skein of clouds/around the sun—/and still the heart/of whatever between us/that lies always undone."

The pitfalls of charting such territory are numerous, and Hogue's scenes elsewhere blur into vagueness, as in "Little Nothings" which attempts to wrench its sense from the cloud of uncertainty the poem proposes: "The unspeaking scent./ The sense that nothing can say." While these veerings into abstraction sometimes work, they can also seem an easy escape, a pseudo-conclusion for poems whose many directions lack a central momentum.

There is stylistic variety in *The Woman in Red*, though the versatility is more experimental than accomplished. In her introduction to Hogue's work, Pamela Stuart praises the rough and mercurial voice, "even as it stumbles and twists," and concludes: "This book makes a big dent and no few scratches in the too-smooth familiar surfaces of current American poetry." And for those readers habituated to a flawless hum, these poems will indeed seem to tear at the fabric of their own telling, appearing at once self-conscious and unpremeditated, precious and rough.

In stark contrast to the collage of sensibility of *Woman in Red*, Leo Romero's *Going Home Away Indian* is flat, minimalistic, and distinctly southwestern in subject, character and voice. These poems are speakings—monologues and dialogues and pieces of stories woven out of remnant myths and absurd fears, hopes and realities. The landscape is Godot-like, where both the dead and living mingle in bars, roam the desert, find boredom; but the main characters also

sparkle with Warholian glamor. There is Marilyn Monroe Indian (“Luscious cactus/fruit lips”) and Skeleton Indian who knows how to dress. Both are envied, desirable and dead. Romero’s humor, though sardonic, is always lightly dealt.

What keeps these poems from sliding into mere parody and caricature is Romero’s impeccable ear. The short, groping lines utterly capture the barely articulate lives that ultimately mean what they say, eloquently. Romero is a master of rhythm. Note the effective deadpan opening of “Slow Poke Indian”:

Slow Poke Indian
 that’s what
 he calls himself
 If he had been
 in the olden times
 he says
 he would have been
 one dead Indian
 mighty quick
 But these are
 modern times
 I don’t worry much
 about being slow
 in this
 day and time
 he says
 After all
 what’s an Indian got
 but time . . .

There is one speaker in *Going Home Away Indian* who gets his head blown off again and again, poem after poem, dream after dream. It’s as if we are witnessing the frozen frames of a cartoon. This sort of repetition is funny and absurd, but it also brings home a point about our culture of replay, about our exposure and immunity to images that wash over us until dream and reality have the same texture.

By the end of the book, a poet-character named Raymond has made his appearance, and the poems become more lyrical. The book also takes on a weight that the individual poems do not possess. Ultimately, Romero is a poet of uncanny and deceptive range.