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# When My Brother Was An Aztec



## Synopsis

"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 fascialike 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.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

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.

Poetry as turgid with metaphors, as disturbing, raw, and, a veces, humorous and sly and naughty doesn't happen often, but in this collection *WHEN MY BROTHER WAS AN AZTEC* Natalie Diaz manages to travel this bumpy terrain with such a sure hand that the result is staggering. Perhaps a part of the intensity of her writing is that as a woman born and raised on an Indian Reservation - and that, without parody intended, is why she writes like a necromancer, an augurer, a sorceress - a conjurer. This poet sees/feels/defines life in a situation close to her so well that she makes her reader finish a poem and immediately return to the top of the poem to make sure it is fully digested before moving on to the next experience. Read Natalie Diaz and understand life on a reservation. *ABECEDARIAN REQUIRING FURTHER EXAMINATION OF ANGLIKAN SERAPHYM SUBJUGATION OF A WILD INDIAN REZERVATION* Angel's don't come to the reservation. Bats, maybe, or owls, boxy mottled things. Coyotes, too. They all mean the same thing - death. And death eats angels, I guess, because I haven't seen an angel fly through this valley ever. Gabriel? Never heard of him. Know a Gabe though - he came through here one powwow and stayed, typical Indian. Sure he had wings, jailbird that he was. He flies around in stolen cars. Wherever he stops, kids grow like gourds from women's bellies. Like I said, no Indian I've ever heard of has ever been or seen an angel. Maybe in a Christmas pageant or something - Nazarene church holds one every December, organized by Pastor John's wife. It's no wonder Pastor John's son is the angel -

everybody knows angels are white. Quit bothering with angels, I say. They're no good for Indians.

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