major anthologies of American verse—including *The Harvard Book of Contemporary American Poetry* and *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*—contained no Indian poetry. Perhaps part of the explanation was the relatively recent appearance of Indian poetry. Writing in 1983, Kenneth Lincoln conceded that "less than twenty years ago, there simply were no acknowledged, much less published, Native American 'poets' in America."

Prior to the literary renaissance of recent decades, the poetry of Native Americans was known only to a few. George Copway's *The Ojibway Conquest* (1850), the first volume of Indian poems published in the United States, appeared in the same decade as the first Indian novel. Its circulation was limited, as were the published poems of Alexander Posey (Creek) and E. Pauline Johnson (Mohawk) during the early years of the twentieth century. Indian origin myths, songs, and stories were translated and presented in verse form in various anthologies, such as George Croynyn's *The Path on the Rainbow* (1918) and Margot Astrov's *The Winged Serpent* (1946), but these volumes did little to acknowledge the work of contemporary Indian poets. Many of the archaic "poems" in such collections were later rediscovered and reprinted in anthologies of Native American literature during the heyday of the literary renaissance.

The first showing of contemporary Indian poetry was in a variety of small journals published in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Special issues of the *South Dakota Review* contained some of the earliest works, as did the limited-edition publications of the Blue Cloud Abbey, a Benedictine monastery in Marvin, South Dakota. Other important venues included the poetry pages of *Akwesasne Notes,* the newspaper published by the Mohawks of upstate New York, and *Sun Tracks,* a literary magazine founded in 1971 by the American Indian Student Club and the department of English at the University of Arizona in Tucson.

Anthologies of Native American poetry soon began to appear, bringing to a wider audience the work of contemporary Indian poets. Nineteen seventy-four was a particularly important year because three major collections of Indian poetry were published. *American Indian Prose and Poetry: We Wait in the Darkness,* edited by Gloria Levitas, Frank Vivelo, and Jacqueline Vivelo, was hailed by Kenneth Lincoln as "the first significant cross-section of Native American poets now writing." *Come to Power: Eleven Contemporary American Indian Poets,* edited by Dick Lourie, included the writings of familiar figures such as Leslie Marmon Silko, Joseph Bruhac, and Duane Niatum.

Writing in the introduction, Bruhac cautioned that *Come to Power* was a mere sampling of what was being produced. "For me, at least, a good anthology is always a reminder of how much more there is in store, like picking one berry at the edge of the woods and knowing from its taste that a whole summer of berries is ahead." As if to prove Bruhac's point, there soon appeared *Voices from Wah'Kon-Tah: Contemporary Poetry of Native Americans,* a treasury of verse gathered from the pages of small journals and magazines published across the country. The foreword by Vine Deloria, Jr., observed that contemporary Indian poets now were bridging "the gap between Chief Joseph and Russell Means," portraying artfully the dissolution of a "glorious past" into a "desperate present."

The most widely anthologized Native American poet was N. Scott Momaday, whose verse has been brought together in *The Gourd Dancer* (1976). After publishing his first poems as an undergraduate at the University of New Mexico, Momaday was strongly influenced by poet Yvor Winters at Stanford. Just as the paintings of Native artists Joe Herrera and Oscar Howe illustrate the "cross-fertilization" of primitivism and modernism in twentieth-century art, the poetry of Winters and Momaday reveal a similar interplay in literature. Winters was one of several modern poets inspired by Indian poetry, especially by a collection of poems adapted from translated Chippewa songs. Momaday, in turn, acknowledged Winters as a prime source of his poetic technique.

Momaday's poems point repeatedly to the unique experiences of his Kiowa ancestors, remembering times past and facing the changed world of the present. In "The Fear of Bo-talee" he recalls the mounted warrior who rode easily among his enemies, seemingly fearless. Yet when the battle was over, he could say "Certainly I was afraid. I was / afraid of the fear in the eyes of my enemies."[1] A sense of foreboding permeates "The Burning," in which the coming of a fire across the prairie is an omen of other tragic invasions to come. "Shapes in the shadows" were approaching, "Always, and always alien and alike."

In the numb, numberless days
There were disasters in the distance,
Strange upheavals. No one understood them.[2]

[1]From *In the Presence of the Sun: Stories and Poems, 1961–1991,* N. Scott Momaday; Copyright © 1992 by N. Scott Momaday, St. Martin's Press, Inc., New York, NY.

[2]From *In the Presence of the Sun: Stories and Poems, 1961–1991,* N. Scott Momaday; Copyright © 1992 by N. Scott Momaday, St. Martin's Press, Inc., New York, NY.

The juxtaposition of what Deloria called the "glorious past" and the "desperate present" is most evident in Momaday's "The Great Fillmore Street Buffalo Drive." Images of those vanished herds of "great, humpbacked animals" and their "wild grace" are superimposed on the grim realities of the streets of San Francisco.[3]

The poetry of James Welch, the Blackfeet/Gros Ventre novelist, is also heavily laden with symbolism and surrealistic juxtapositions. Surrealism corresponds well to Welch's interest in dreams and visions as a basis of spiritual life. His "Magic Fox" is a surrealistic poem in which the trickster changes dreams into nightmares and transposes the reality of horses, fish, and stars. Likewise, in "Getting Things Straight," Welch describes in naturalistic detail the "rising, circling" hunting practices of a hawk and the vision quest of an Indian giant who "had his vision / came back to town and drank himself / sick." But the real and the unreal are confusing, uncertain. "What does it mean?" asks the poet; and as for that hawk, "Is he my vision?"[4] The fallen giant of "Getting Things Straight" is just one of the many broken souls who appear in Welch's poetry. In "The Man from Washington," a tour de force of compressed history, Welch offers a devastating synopsis of the ill effects of federal treaty making and dispossession. Packed away "in some far corner of a flat world," the Indians receive a visit from a "slouching dwarf with rainwater eyes" who promises them

that treaties would be signed, and everyone—
man, woman and child—would be inoculated
against a world in which we had no part,
a world of money, promise and disease.[5]

Anger is often not far below the surface of Native American poetry, but harsh realities are also treated with irony and humor. Maurice Kenny (Mohawk) was one of the most successful Indian poets of the 1980s, a decade in which five volumes of his verse were published. For *The Mama Poems,* he received the American Book Award in 1984. He directed his razor-sharp wit at the inequities and injustices around

[3]From *In the Presence of the Sun: Stories and Poems, 1961–1991,* N. Scott Momaday; Copyright © 1992 by N. Scott Momaday, St. Martin's Press, Inc., New York, NY.

[4]James Welch. From *Riding the Earthboy 40* by James Welch. Harper & Row; Copyright © 1974 by James Welch. All rights reserved.

[5]James Welch. From *Riding the Earthboy 40* by James Welch. Harper & Row; Copyright © 1974 by James Welch. All rights reserved.

him, with results that were both insightful and hilarious. In "Corn Planter," he describes seven years of fruitless planting when ravens and heat, locusts and moles, devour his seeds. In the eighth year, the corn planter succeeds in getting a crop, but when he takes it to market he finds that "The people of my village are too poor to buy it." Abandoning the natural life, he succumbs to the false images of the dominant culture and succeeds well enough to fail.

The ninth spring I make chicken feather headdresses,
plastic tom-toms and beaded belts.
I grow rich,
buy an old Ford,
drive to Chicago,
and get drunk
on welfare checks.[6]

Perhaps the most important contemporary Native American poet was Simon J. Ortiz (Acoma Pueblo), a writer whose works are winsome and casual, yet filled with a powerful, biting wit. His search for identity and meaning took him on a cross-country odyssey in the mid-1970s, a trip reminiscent of the one N. Scott Momaday described in *The Way to Rainy Mountain.* Ortiz's *Going for the Rain* (1976) is a collection of short poems about the spiritual dimensions of his quest. The traveler-as-seeker, Ortiz writes in the preface, sometimes finds meaning and sometimes does not. "But he continues; he must. His travelling is a prayer as well, and he must keep on." In "Washyuma Motor Hotel" he imagines ancient spirits conspiring to cause the concrete foundations of a motel to crumble. The American tourists brush their teeth and fall into a dreamless sleep in their motel rooms, unaware that in the earth beneath them "ancient spirits tell stories / and jokes and laugh and laugh."[7] "The Significance of a Veteran's Day" describes the poet "waking up on concrete" one cold morning and "calling for significance / and no one answered." He finds the strength "to survive insignificance" by recalling (and believing) what his grandfather had taught him. He places himself within an ancient continuum:

[6]From Maurice Kenny, *Between Two Rivers: Selected Poems, 1956–1984.* Reprinted with permission from White Pine Press, Fredonia, NY 14063.

[7]Selected and excerpted lines are from poems in *Going for the Rain,* © 1976. Permission is granted by the author, Simon J. Ortiz.