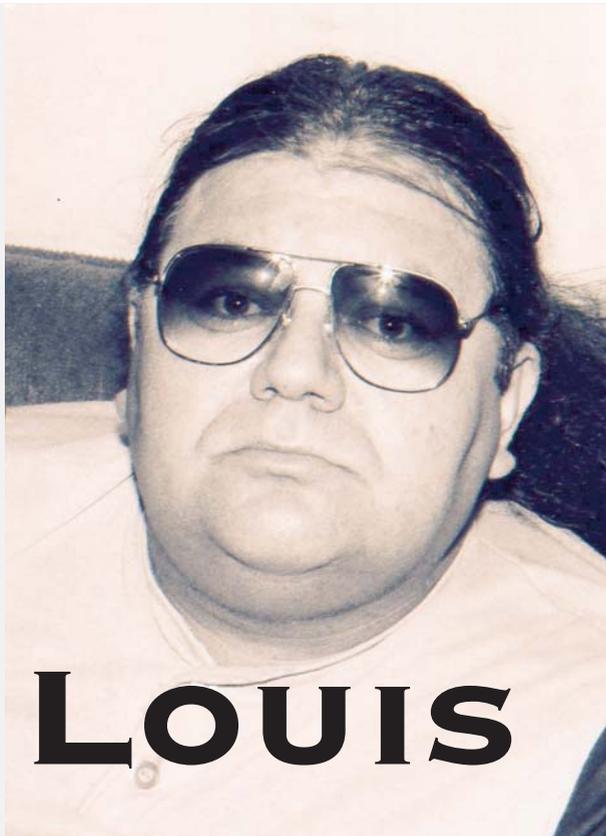


WLT AUTHOR FACTS

AUTHOR Adrian C. Louis (b. 1946)

COUNTRY United States

PRINCIPAL GENRES Verse, Fiction



ADRIAN C. LOUIS

POET OF SURVIVAL

ROBERT BERNER

WHEN ADRIAN C. LOUIS WAS ASKED IN A 1999 INTERVIEW to define the “overriding concerns” of his work, he said, “The overall theme . . . is personal survival. I’m writing about my life.”¹ This statement and the facts of his life, as they can be culled from the interview and from explanatory notes in his publications, will tempt readers of his poems to assume that the voice they hear is the voice of Louis himself.² They are correct insofar as that voice is the one delineated in the cultural and social ambiguities of the Pine Ridge Reservation, the conflicted world of alcoholism and poverty that is his home. We hear this voice in the title poem of *Among the Dog Eaters* (1992), when a “fullblood” acquaintance complains about the exploitation of Indians.

“It’s the same on most reservations,” he said.

“These white men come in
and steal our women . . .

They become Indians by insertion! Instant
experts on redskin culture. Once they dip their wicks
they start speaking of Indians as . . . *us!*

. . . The result is novels by white poets who label
themselves *Native Americans*, anthropological
monographs by liberal assholes,
and more breeds like you.”

Still, the social hopelessness of the reservation is no greater than Louis’s own hopelessness about it. An attempt by “squawmen and skins” to organize a march against violence fails because very few show up for it: “Everybody was too busy beating / the shit out of each other. / Men were stabbing women. / Women were clubbing kids.” The intellectual and artistic courage of such lines is breathtaking, and the

consistent articulation of this vision of home/hell at a very high level of poetic craft makes Louis’s fine poetry worthy of more attention than it has received. In these brief comments, I am hoping to open Louis’s work to a much broader audience.

In *Among the Dog Eaters*, Louis develops an alter ego of himself in the remarkable character of Verdell Ten Bears. (At least this is suggested by a comparison of “At the Burial of a Ballplayer Who Died from Diabetes,” in which the ballplayer is identified as “my wife’s little brother” [ADE], with “A Brand New Snag,” in which we are told that “On Sunday, the little brother / of Verdell’s wife dies / from complications of diabetes” [BTS].)³ Verdell is sometimes wise, often foolish, and almost always self-destructive. On the one hand, his reaction to “ignorant kids . . . / break-dancing to *Vanilla Ice* / on a boom box blasting ten yards / away from the Porcupine Singers” and to a beautiful girl who is “fancy dancing” to the music of the latter is to want to “defend her honor” (ADE). He also appears as a bad influence in “The Sweat Lodge,” which describes an attempt to overcome the urge to drink by undergoing a sweatlodge ceremony and praying to the Great Spirit: “I promise / I’ll never touch a drop again.’ / . . . A week later I was at the Oasis Bar / in Rapid City drinking with Verdell.”

The most significant poem in the collection for an understanding of Louis’s own survival is “Burning Trash One Sober Night.” In the first of three sections, Louis describes a drive as winter is turning to spring along “the death road / to White Clay . . . / to get to the merchants / of death before closing. . . . / Three hours later, / . . . I vowed to quit

**“LOUIS HAS OFFERED HIS READERS
YET MORE EVIDENCE OF A
BASIC TRUTH ABOUT POETRY:
THAT IT IS ONLY IN LANGUAGE
THAT ORDER, MEANING, AND
(HIS WORD) GRACE ARE POSSIBLE.”**

drinking forever again.” The vow is obviously ambiguous: he has *again* vowed to quit drinking. When he burns “still-born poems” in a trashcan, however, he hears voices in the fire: “Death songs lifted from the fire . . . / Their word shadows droned / into other shadows / and a love fire flamed and gave hope.” In the second section of the poem, we see the result. Now, driving *through* White Clay, he believes he can hear behind the music on his radio some of the song of the night before: “Drunken life boils down / to basic commands. / If you tell yourself to quit drinking, / you will. / If you tell yourself you want to die, / you will, my brother, you will.” Finally, in the third section he notices winter wheat emerging through “remnant snows” while “driving the reservation,” and then, although he runs over a skunk, feels himself to be on “the red road,” the symbol in Lakota ritual of spiritual health: “Well-perfumed, I drove in balance, / on the red road toward / the rest of my life.”

Louis’s next two collections—*Blood Thirsty Savages* (1994) and *Vortex of Indian Fevers* (1995)—reveal an increasing despair and even anger at the moral intractability of the reservation’s most antisocial inhabitants and their inability to live in relation to tribal tradition. The despair is quietly and sadly defined in “Looking for Judas,” the subject of which is an illegally killed deer hanging gutted in the moonlight. The poem’s last line, seeming almost thrown away, shows that here the real subject is the loss of traditional tribal wisdom by people who nevertheless believe that, merely by racial inheritance, they alone are able to honor it.

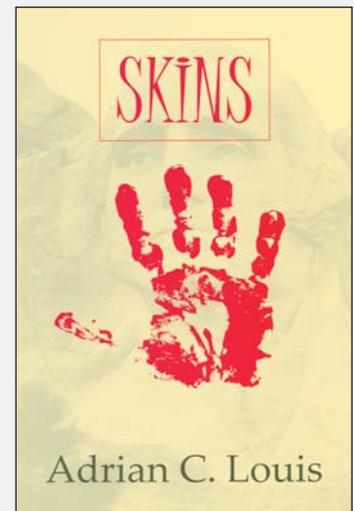
They say before the white man
brought us Jesus, we had honor.
They say when we killed the Deer People,
we told them their spirits
would live in our flesh.
We used bows of ash, no spotlights, no rifles,
and their holy blood became ours.
Or something like that. (VIF)

This mourning for the loss of tradition is frequently expressed in Louis’s verse, though never more movingly than here. But in the aftermath of his discovery that the

heroic will to achieve sobriety was in himself and nowhere else, he defines in two series of brief prose pieces both the hazards of physical ill health—the experience of hospitalization for gall-bladder surgery that gives its title to *Vortex of Indian Fevers*—and the possibility of psychological renewal.

“The Blood Thirst of Verdell Ten Bears” makes it clear that if Verdell is Louis’s alter ego, he has been exorcised (BTS). Verdell is walking his usual self-destructive path in Rapid City when he decides to return to the reservation to kill a man, but when he gets there he goes to “the usual drunken, dope party” (ironically in a housing project named not for Red Cloud but for Crazy Horse) and goes to sleep there to “dream of a bus bound for Hell” and “a man with a bad face rash that oozes yellow pus . . . passing out candy to children.” This is the man he has come to kill, but when he awakens he realizes that he himself is the diseased man: “For twenty years I’ve been living a lie, sedated by alcohol. . . . I go one way. My life goes another.” Louis’s rejection of Verdell, which here seems complete, is echoed in “Rhetorical Judea”: “I shun those / who don’t shun excess. . . . I’ve abandoned those / who seek wild abandon” (VIF).

Louis’s three most recent collections make clear his rise to an even higher plateau of artistic achievement and personal discovery. In *Ancient Acid Flashes Back* (2000), he addressed a phase of his life to which he had given little prior attention: his experience in the drug “scene” in San Francisco in the late 1960s. The volume’s title is a declarative sentence: after three



Cover of Louis’s novel *Skins* (1997)

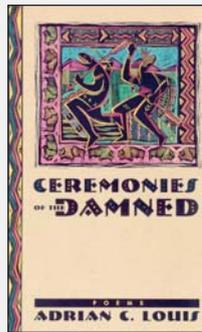
Courtesy: Ellis Press

decades, “acid” experiences still “flash back” to the present. His strategy of narrating his story in the third person does not hide the clear autobiographical origins of the events in the life of his protagonist, whom he calls *Naatsi* (always italicized), and when we juxtapose a reference to him as “a *taibo naatsi*, a half-breed,” with the fact that a note to an earlier poem indicates that *taibo* is a Paiute word meaning “white man” (ADE), we can suspect that *Naatsi* is less a personal name than a definition of the protagonist as a Paiute. (Louis has informed me that *naatsi* is a Paiute word meaning “boy” and that his grandmother always called him that.) In any case, the book’s autobiographical origin is clearly stated in references to *Naatsi*’s childhood in “Postscript: A Case Study,” the last poem in the series (AAFB), and in the geographical and medical allusions in the first poem, “A Prayer Opens the Floodgates.”

It’s the nipping dog of prairie heat
that breeds invocation. June ‘99 &
Naatsi is middle-aging gracelessly
smackdab in the middle of America.
Surrendering to his sputtering
lawnmower on a blistering Dakota day,
he retreats indoors to soothe his high
blood pressure & smoke one of his
daily ration of ten cigarettes.

Disgusted with the stock-car race on his television screen, he prays to the Great Spirit to transport the race and its spectators somewhere else and then discovers that “they’re torquing / my brain back to Haight / Street, the ‘60s where / photon torpedoes / of acid exploded / my eyeballs, / my soul & / my groin.”

The two long poems that comprise the first half of *Ceremonies of the Damned* (1997) are of major importance in understanding Louis’s present state as a poet. Although they seem at first to treat different subjects, they are essentially related. “Petroglyphs for Serena” deals with a student whose predicament means more than itself: “Wild-ass Serena and our Indian dance / of self-destruction.” She is a skillful auto mechanic somehow diverted into a college education that does not interest her. The poem deals with a relationship with her that is well-intentioned—but confused and eventually sexual—and with the aftermath of her sudden death in a car crash: the funeral, hallucinatory encounters with her spirit, a related despair over the fate of children of the reservation, and an encounter with an old woman, identified later as “the grandmother / of us all.”



Cover of Louis’s poetry collection *Ceremonies of the Damned* (1997)

Courtesy: University of Nevada Press

She said back in the old days
we took care of our elders.
There was no AFDC, no food stamps.
We had gardens, we hunted.
We respected our parents
and we weren’t afraid of work.
In the old days, men did not beat
their women for no reason.
Yes, in the old days life was better.
In the old days I was young and in love,
she said with a shrug . . . so I kissed her.
On Serena’s mother’s old
cracked fullblood lips
I kissed her ever so softly.

Soon after this, Serena’s younger sister Thalia tells him about the old Lakota belief that a woman must mourn a year for the dead: “Stay home and mourn *and* never offend the spirits.” She tells him this in a motel room just before they initiate an affair. In fact, betrayal is the essential theme of “Petroglyphs of Serena”—the betrayal of traditional tribal wisdom, betrayal of Serena’s memory, and betrayal in sexual infidelity.

Two years after Thalia leaves the reservation, apparently for good, it is related in “Earth Bone Connected to the Spirit Bone” that Louis and his wife are living off the reservation in Rushville, Nebraska. This long poem expresses not only his hatred for the “rednecks” of Rushville (called “Cowturdville” in other poems) but the effort to relate his earth bone to his spirit bone—that is, to achieve spiritual understanding of a fated existence that is defined in terms of his wife’s Alzheimer’s disease.

The movement in the poem, through passages that are both painful and lyrical, is from self-discovery and even a certain wisdom (understood in part as a rejection of Verdell’s request for money)—complicated by rage at the evils afflicting not only the reservation but America in general and his own life in particular—to a more or less traditional prayer to the four directions, to the Great Spirit, and to Grandmother Earth. The prayer cannot end in an *Amen* because another word, *Alzheimer’s*, “becomes the only word / in our world.” The poem, that is, ends in the grief and anger in which it begins, and tension between wisdom and rage gives it much of its power. The combination of love for the Alzheimer’s victim, gratitude to her for the grace which that love makes possible, and the wasting regret that inevitably poisons memory is almost too painful for reading:

Where are you now, my love?
And how is it still possible for me to hate?
Worn by the daily agitation of your slow-motion
terminal disease, I retain my anger.
I . . . think of one enemy in
particular. The bastard is thirteen years older
than me and I will not be speaking ill
of the dead when I piss on his grave.

I will be merely dousing the white devils
which possessed him. Their names
were greed, lust, and booze. He was the me
before I met you.

Or consider, in the following, the ache concentrated in the last two words:

Once the Rez sun rose bloated and angered.
Like a neglected child, it pouted over
the purple hills around Pine Ridge village.
Dogs ran looking for cars to crush them.
Soon it would be too hot to do anything but find
shade and suffer, yet Adrian would survive.
He had enough beer stocked up to get drunk
and sleep through the heat of the day
and get drunk again at night.
Adrian was one smart Indian alkie.
A flesh and blood oxymoron.
O sweetheart remember?
Please remember.

Such passages suggest that Louis's writing has achieved a remarkable degree of lyricism, and no better example of it can be seen than in "The Promise," the final poem in *Bone and Juice*, which employs two specific Great Plains images—tart, astringent chokecherries and grasshoppers, which here and elsewhere in Louis's poems are a metaphor for aridity and sterility. He combines these images with the "ghost road" he and his wife must travel together.

Listen,
when the chokecherries
ripen, you'll hear me call.
When the grasshoppers
wither, I'll be standing
with you.

Upon the ghost road,
hand in hand,
our dry lips dark
with cherry blood,
we'll sing our song
of what was us.
When the chokecherries
ripen, look for me.

I'll be there, I promise.

Dancing up a dust storm
with all our lost days.

In these poems, Louis has achieved a level of artistic excellence that requires a closer look at his thirty-year journey as a poet. Choosing to confront his own life step by step without illusion, to discover strategies for defining that life, and to imprint his autobiography again and again in his poems, he has offered his readers yet more evidence of a basic truth about poetry: that it is only in language that order,

meaning, and (his word) grace are possible. Fate has given him a subject valuable less for itself than for what he has been able to make of it. In our present cultural state, the temptation will be to assign that work to a "Native American" ghetto. That will certainly be the determination of those who justify their cultural role by exaggerating racial differences for the sake of the shibboleth of "diversity." Adrian Louis is a significant American poet who has taken his own specific piece of the country and its culture and passed it through his own vision to give it a meaning beyond its local importance, great as that is. His poems more than satisfy a basic question about any work that aspires to literary worth: Will I ever want to read it again? Moreover, the force of Louis's thoughtful poetry raises an additional question: Can any future be considered without it? **WLT**

University of Wisconsin, Oshkosh

Editorial note: Louis's new book of prose poems, *Evil Corn*, was published in July 2004 by Ellis Press (www.ellispress.com).

¹ For the full text of the interview (from *Geronimo: A Journal of Politics and Culture*), see the Adrian C. Louis page of Cary Nelson's Modern American Poetry Web site (www.english.uiuc.edu/aps).

² I am grateful to Adrian C. Louis for his comments on a preliminary draft of this article in a letter of March 16, 2003.

³ Parenthetical citations from Louis's collections of poetry utilize the following abbreviations:

AAFB *Ancient Acid Flashes Back*. Reno: University of Nevada Press, 2000.

ADE *Among the Dog Eaters*. Albuquerque, New Mexico: West End, 1992.

BTS *Blood Thirsty Savages*. St. Louis, Missouri: Time Being, 1994.

VIF *Vortex of Indian Fevers*. Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1995.

Louis's first book was *The Indian Cheap Wine Seance* (Providence, R.I.: Grey Flannel, 1974). Two early chapbooks, both published by *Blue Cloud Quarterly* in Marvin, South Dakota, are *Muted War Drums* (1977) and *Sweets for the Dancing Bears* (1979). Most of Louis's poems in *Days of Obsidian*, *Days of Grace: Selected Poetry and Prose by Four Native American Writers* (Duluth, Minnesota: Poetry Harbor, 1994) were revised for publication in *Vortex of Indian Fevers*. All those published in *Skull Dance* (Jamaica, Vermont: Bull Thistle, 1998) were included, with slight revisions in *Bone and Juice*. Louis also is the author of a remarkable collection of short fiction, *Wild Indians and Other Creatures* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 1996), and a novel, *Skins* (New York: Crown, 1995). The latter was reissued in 2002 by Ellis Press (Granite Falls, Minnesota) and adapted for a feature film released in August 2002.

ROBERT BERNER received his Ph.D. from the University of Washington (1960) and is currently professor emeritus at the University of Wisconsin, Oshkosh. He is the author of *Defining American Indian Literature: One Nation Divisible* (1999), has written many articles and book reviews, and is a regular contributor to *World Literature Today*.