

Vivian Faith Prescott. *Our Tents are Small Volcanoes*. Quill's Edge Press, 2018. 44pp. ISBN: 9780996742436. <https://quillsedgepress.org>

I'm at Playa, a residency in remote Eastern Oregon reading Vivian Faith Prescott's *Our Tents are Small Volcanoes*. My cabin sits on the edge of Summer Lake, a shallow alkali lake five miles wide bordered by the 1000-foot rim of Winter Ridge. I imagine the tents' bright triangles as cryptic letters, carrying meaning, ready to spell words that instruct and soothe and sustain. The first line in the book—"During the last ice age we were stories" (6).

Examining the losses associated with Sámi migration and forced assimilation, Prescott writes the times before language, writes the old languages, the attempts to erase words that still exist, lie silent, layered in us, in the land, in our stories. Prescott is a fifth-generation Alaskan of Sámi and Suomalainen descent. She lives in a fishcamp in Wrangell in Southeast Alaska, intimately connected to the land and sea.

Prescott's poems create a world of seeking home, tracing loss, excavating and exhuming words, concepts left behind. She examines the power of English and Sámi words, as in "*Oavlluš*—Depression or hollow with slushy snow in it" (14), where we are cautioned against "sharp unguarded words, especially on the tundra" like the ice that forms a muted space, "so weak it cannot bear us." In "*Guoldu*—Cloud of snow which blows up from the ground," the speaker loses sight of herself.¹

Prescott titles poems with North Sámi words for the distinct conditions of snow, "*Njáhc*—Thaw" and "*Spildi*—Very thin layer of ice on water or milk." Poems plumb the speaker's personal history, Sámi families' history in Alaska, looking across generations, centuries for clarity, for clues how they came this way. Looking for the continuity, the lifeways that say this is how we travel safely, this is the wisdom that sees us through.

Prescott found the phrase "*our tents are small volcanoes*" in Emilie Demant Hatt's diary *With the Lapps in the High Mountains* (2013). The reference citations are an integral part of this work: what is found, unearthed, uncovered; what is named, claimed, acknowledged; an inverse of the process of erasing, obscuring, acculturating, assimilating, of disappearing, of ethnic cleansing. These poems, this process, is the antidote to erasure: poems and stories told in tents, lodges, shelters that hold families, people together.

The poems carry elders' truths and observation that "reindeer are happy when clouds / pull down to tundra" in "*Rodda*—Hard Going (Too Little Snow)" (22). Prescott brings those truths side by side with the present, with choices about what we need, what we can afford. The book conveys a sense of movement, of the uncertainty of journeys, change and new beginnings. "Drawing Blanks" considers displacement, misunderstandings, and names the ethnocentrism in others' view of "Nomadic peoples. No Madness" and "We say it is *baiki*, the home we carry with us" (21).

Prescott recognizes the power and necessity of reading tracks, of following language, old maps and memories. "Sonnet for Migrations," the first poem, is set aboard ship, presumably on the

journey that brought Sámi reindeer herders to Alaska in the 1890s to care for reindeer being introduced to offset the decimation of the marine mammals. The campaign engineered by Protestant missionary Sheldon Jackson to find reindeer and herders in Scandinavia and transport them—across the Atlantic, across North America by rail, to Alaska by sea, and then overland to the Yukon River—is almost unbelievable, yet totally familiar. He was another missionary/colonizer with a plan for Indigenous populations that included the erasure of Indigeneity.

The poems carry movement, a desperate, delicate need to follow those changes, to make sense of them, to document the blanks, specifically in the poem “Drawing Blanks” (21) and also to “hold an aroma of memory,” as in “*Vouhhtit*—To observe and learn from tracks” (8).

It’s snowing on Summer Lake, and I’m reading about the subtropical humidity of the Arkansas River, about colonization and ethnic cleansing in the 1820s during the removals of Choctaws, Creeks and Cherokee immigrants into Osage land—land we Osage had ousted the Quapaw from earlier. In 1830 one of the steamboats bringing Cherokees away from their homes to Little Rock was called the *Reindeer*. Americans had already embraced the animal—reindeer pulling Santa’s sleigh appeared in “A Visit from St. Nicholas,” known as “The Night Before Christmas” in 1823—having fetishized and absorbed it into the culture by the time the Sámis were immigrating with their animals to Alaska.

In eastern Oregon, residents are taking time-lapse photos of clouds streaming over the ridges surrounding the lakebed. On clear days sunrise and sunset make kaleidoscopic images, and clouds draw shadows on the ridges. It’s satisfying to watch the clouds billowing across the land, to watch the full length of a day in the span of a few minutes. The sequence is beautiful, but I want to play it backwards, to reverse the patterns on dry grass, see puffs of clouds flow back up the ridge.

Prescott’s book is like watching colonization reverse itself, disappear. She is unraveling the binding, loosening the knots, the tight weave meant to cover history, to say that life as we know it now has always been. In “Likewise Great Observers of Omens,” among “hungry human herds” a shed skin appears as a frozen deer hide, a coat draping the back of a chair, a blue tarp flapping against a broken down snow machine (19).

She is tracking people and relations, finding meaning, relevance. In “Likewise Great Observers of Omens,” it says: “When I left, we were still clans, birds spoke overhead and I held storms in my fist” (18). Prescott holds “tight to the rim of this trail long disappeared” in *Our Tents are Small Volcanoes*, both the poem and chapbook.

Our Tents are Small Volcanoes was published in 2018 by Quill’s Edge Press, dedicated to publishing women over the age of 50, and was the Editor’s Choice in 2015-2016 Quill’s Edge Press chapbook contest. Prescott holds an MFA from the University of Alaska as well as a Ph.D. in Cross Cultural Studies from UA/Fairbanks. Her previous chapbooks have dealt with cultural genocide in *The Hide of My Tongue* (2012), and with the Sámi North American migration in *Traveling with The Underground People*.

Ruby Hansen Murray

Notes

¹ The Sámi words in these titles are italicized in the original text.

Works Cited

Hatt, Emilie Dement. *With the Lapps in the High Mountains: A Woman Among the Sami, 1907-8*. 1913. Edited and translated by Barbara Sjöholm, University of Wisconsin Press, 2013.
Prescott, Vivian Faith. *The Hide of My Tongue: Ax L'óot' Doogú*. Plain View Press, 2012.
---. *Traveling with The Underground People*. Finishing Line Press, 2017.