

RE-MEMBERING THE DARK AND THE LIGHT

a review by Jennifer Peedin

Kimberly L. Becker. *Bringing Back the Fire*. Spuyten Duyvil Publishing, 2022.

Kimberly Becker's new volume of poems, *Bringing Back the Fire*, is a collection of darkness and light, of grief and relief, and is in part a personal journey. On a much wider scale, it is a journey that reflects the exploration that is ongoing in North Carolina and in the South at large as we remember and learn about our Indigenous history. While Becker "re-members," so do we; as Becker calls home over and over again, so do we, wherever that may be. In the title poem, told from the perspective of the water spider that brought the fire to the world in the Cherokee legend, she writes, "I dream dreams of fire and water / And when it thunders I think of the hollow in the sycamore tree on that / island that once seemed impossible to reach." This story, like Becker, seems to be calling for a re-membrance and a redefinition of what it means to be from the South, what we hope the South will one day become, though at times it seems impossible to reach.

Becker is assiduous in communicating with the past, memory, and grief, both her own grief and others. Her new poems are frank in their raw emotion and unromantic in the best way possible. Those of us who tire of a romanticized version of the dark places in life and the journey to circumvent them find relief in Becker's poems. They easily allow us to see ourselves in these situations, in that arduous journey of trying to bring back the fire. In

doing so, Becker divides the collection into two sections, Dark and Light, the former beginning the volume. The Dark section opens with "Affixing the Halo," her own story of the process of getting a Halo brace before stereotactic brain surgery, but readers find bits of themselves as she describes the painful process: "The halo is heavy as hell / It becomes hard to hold your head up / with the weight / of this unwieldy glory." We remember the burdens of smiling when angry, holding our heads up when we want to collapse in exhaustion, and Becker embraces those thoughts, too, writing, "Buck up; hold your head high? / But the halo is heavy; you can barely walk / No way you could fly." She offers permission to let the halo fall and drop our head into the absolute chaos of modern life.

Other poems reflect Becker's preoccupation with memory and home. She often writes "re-member," stressing the reconnection and recollection of the past rather than a simple remembering of what is forgotten. This may be evidence of Becker's continued explorative journey into her Cherokee heritage with her consistent use of the Cherokee language, seeing and connecting with her ancestors in everyday life and retelling Cherokee stories and legends such as the title poem, "Bringing Back the Fire." This process of exploration and identifying as a poet of Cherokee descent is present in her other volumes,



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but in this collection, Becker allows readers to engage with the Cherokee past and how it bleeds into a present-day North Carolina, reminding us of a long ago home. It is natural to think of the past, of home, in the midst of grief or struggle, and in her poem "Heimweh" (German for homesickness), Becker writes, "I am far from / mound and mountain / . . . / but I will face East to sing / my morning song in Cherokee." Many of us, in the waning days of a pandemic, often look homewards or to a past with more comfort in the known, and though Becker acknowledges this anxious nostalgia, she is also very quick to share that she is not alone in her

journey through the present. Spirits are scattered throughout the collection, spirits that watch and council and those that have chosen Becker to share their story. They are "Knocking from within barn walls / Spirits saying / we, too, lived with unmet needs / we, too, need attention," and they come to the surface in a trip to New Echota, the beginning of the Cherokee Trail of Tears, as Becker is over-

come with emotion narrating, "from this place of strength and grief, / offering thanks / My tears are for self, but also from deeper source." In the journey to bring back the fire, Becker reminds us of a time of deep darkness, employing these spirits to narrate in "Missio Mei," a poem about Native boarding schools. She writes "of a religion that forced baptism / onto heathens / forced innocence / from children." Though reflecting a dark time in American history, many in the Indigenous community are now active in ensuring the future is different. Becker writes, "This is what happens / when you give away your power / Now my mission is to call it back."

Offering these words of power and action, Becker calls us into the Light section of her collection. As promised, she brings us through the grief to the other side, a lighter side, made wiser from trauma.

In *Bringing Back the Fire*, Kimberly Becker's poems bring life back to a comatose world, to awaken what was forgotten, but she must take us through the fire to get there. Becker takes us back to the lows of the past few years as she describes hospital rooms, COVID chaos in the ER, and the undignified state of death. Her words serve as a reminder that there must be darkness, sometimes significant darkness, before there can be light. When she does return us to the light, brings us back to the fire, we know we've conquered the darkness. ■



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JENNIFER PEEDIN grew up in Eastern North Carolina and is currently a PhD candidate at West Virginia University where she researches southeastern Indigenous and Black narratives that rely on swamps and hurricanes.

KIMBERLY L. BECKER is author of several poetry collections, including *Words Facing East* (WordTech Editions, 2016), *Flight* (MadHat Press, 2018) *The Bed Book* (Spuyten Duyvil, 2020). Her poems have appeared in journals and anthologies, including *Women Write Resistance: Poets Resist Gender Violence* (Hyacinth Girl Press, 2013); *Indigenous Message on Water* (Indigenous World Forum on Water and Peace, 2014); and *Tending the Fire: Native Voices and Portraits* (University of New Mexico Press, 2017).

ABOVE TOP *Just As I Am* (acrylic paint on canvas, 8x10) AND BOTTOM *Some Day* (acrylic paint on canvas, 8x10) by Jody Bradley (Cherokee Syllabary behind the figures, respectively, "Just as I Am" and "Amazing Grace")

Read about Cherokee artist JODY BRADLEY with the poem that precedes this review.