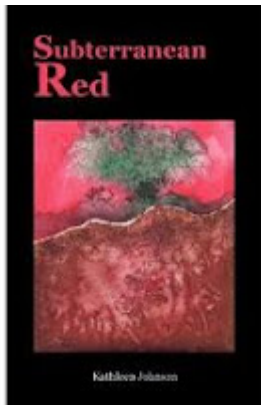




[deniselow.blogspot.com /2012/06/kathleen-johnsons-subterranean-red.html](http://deniselow.blogspot.com/2012/06/kathleen-johnsons-subterranean-red.html)

Kathleen Johnson's SUBTERRANEAN RED Explores Cherokee/Anglo Heritage

Denise Low : 3-4 minutes



Kathleen Johnson's second book of poetry alternates between images and verse, between free verse and prose, between Tsalagi (Cherokee) and Anglo traditions. She writes: "Poetry is the language spoken here/ in Gaelic, in English, in Tsalagi" ("Waiting for Winter Dark"). As more and more Americans are born with mixed heritages, this book is a field guide to survival. Johnson finds ways to inspire. She remembers Tsalagi people who were persecuted and exiled: "...the flame carried / on the trail to Oklahoma / still burns" ("Waiting for Winter Dark").



The strong red-on-black cover design sets up a crackling dynamism. Portraits of grandparents accompanying text create short narratives that evoke heritage in personal terms. The slippage of memory makes storytelling incomplete, so lyrics prevail in this book. The poem "Ghost" teeters between the worlds of the living and the departed. This is also a moment between present and past. Winter imagery is the backdrop, with snowfall like "a gauzy shroud." The narrator looks at "... the days before, / the days after"; she wonders, "Who can wake this world?" It is a moment set in a void, yet sound continues. *Sotto voce* growls of a bear are part of this surreal place, and "She hears only her own / wretched, beautiful, lusty wail." Even when identity is removed from the narrator, she still has her