

Trevino Brings Plenty. *Wakpá Wanáǵi, Ghost River*. Omaha, NE: The Backwaters Press, 2015. 81 pp.

<http://thebackwaterspress.com/our-authors/trevino-l-brings-plenty/ghost-river/>

The title of Trevino Brings Plenty's newest book of poetry, *Wakpá Wanáǵi, Ghost River*, signals his close ties to his Lakota culture despite the disruptions of colonialism and removals from home and language that his body of work depicts. In this latest work, the focus becomes not just the urban poet and his personal concerns, but also extended family and the people he encounters in his role as a social worker in a large city. Even as the speaker of these poems notes the damage done by these relatives, people whose neglect or abuse will inevitably create heart-rending problems in the future, he treats them with respect for the ways in which they're doing the best they can, or doing what they know, given their resources and the ways in which their own lives have been affected by loss, addiction, and mental illness. The poems show us that these people, too, are worthy of compassion even while we recognize the danger of trusting them. In this way, whether they are literal blood relatives or not, the people depicted in *Wakpá Wanáǵi* feel like members of an extended family—the people you love and who break your heart, who are capable of great sacrifice and betrayal, people who give you the best and worst of who you are. That family is everywhere in this recent book, reminding readers of *mitakuye oyas'in*, the Lakota concept of the interrelatedness of all people and all things. If we are all relatives, the poems in *Wakpá Wanáǵi* show us how to think about the most troubled and troubling among us.

From the very first poem of the book, “The Well” (3) there is a sense of working together to move toward healing. The speaker addresses his cousin, and describes a well that is “deeper than you recalled” and that is “darkly filled with your family’s story,” its images causing tears that can’t be extinguished. However, he offers his willingness to do the work together, to face the pain that will inevitably come from this process:

Cousin, my back is strong.
We will tend these waters together.
We will dig wells for our neighbors.
Cousin, we will pull through together.

By working together on this task, they can improve not only their own situation, but bring water (healing) to others. This first poem highlights the concept of being a good relative, an important Lakota value. It gives the reader a sense of hope, too: here is someone who is willing to lend a hand, to do the hard work of bringing healing. We are not alone, no matter how difficult the task.

But if that sounds romantic—like something from a Leaning Tree greeting card—the book’s remaining poems show starkly the situations that will arise from taking seriously the concept of *mitakuye oyas'in*, situations so painful they will make digging a well feel like just about the worst idea anyone could come up with. There is a teenage girl who seems hell-bent on destroying herself in front of the speaker’s eyes, and then he notes that

she is just one in a constant stream of suicidal young women. The details of her self-harm will haunt the reader. There is a boy who plays basketball, and whose poem nods to the possibility that basketball can be a metaphor for navigating life, or navigating the challenges of mental illness; but the poem's title also names him "The Kid I Fear" (35-36) and notes that he has experienced terrible violence, and may be capable of unleashing it even against someone trying to help him. There is a man who will go on smoking even after a cancer diagnosis, telling us the cigarettes smoke out the spiders in his throat, put there by Iktomi's woman. He calmly awaits his turn to traverse the Milky Way (the *Wakpá Wanáǵi* of the book's title). There is a grandmother who loses custody of her grandchildren because she leaves them alone while she hunts for a job; she turns to alcohol and prostitution in her grief. There is the poem about the celebrity who has committed suicide, whose last act will influence the speaker's clients. There are literal blood relatives, uncles who do nothing to stop a woman from being beaten, or who become grandfathers but do not take seriously the responsibility of the role. The people who are depicted in these poems push the reader to consider what it would mean to treat others with compassion and respect even as we see them fail.

In addition to creating a world of relatives, *Wakpá Wanáǵi* moves through time. The book's first section includes poems that feature the speaker's past and childhood memories of the reservation, of his grandfather, and of learning the new geographies of post-Relocation life in the city—learning to eat fast food, staying in hotels. Several poems in the book, especially in this section, depict a kind of hypnosis in urban Indians brought on by the blue flicker of the television screen, the constant buzz of social media. While the poet critiques compliance and complacency, he also notes the appearance of these motifs in his own childhood in the city. In his adult life, memory asserts and reasserts itself, sometimes in surprising moments, insisting on its ability to take the speaker out of the present moment, to make him lose himself for a time and meet the demands of the past.

Several poems in the book's last section look forward to the near or distant future—one that sometimes delves into the world of science fiction though it is still recognizable. For example, the poem "Simulacra Reconstructive Memory Therapy" (75-76) depicts a time when advances in artificial intelligence mean you can heal from personal trauma by having new experiences with a simulacrum of the loved one who has caused you pain—a replica you can love who does not, for a change, engage in neglect and abuse. But the stanzas also sound like the familiar cadences of a drug ad, promising that "these units are implanted with your memories and aid to transmute your traumas to give you that sense of safety and security" (76). Except you can't really get away from trauma: seeing pictures of Wounded Knee triggers a memory of grandparents, and the therapy is undone. It's as if, in some of these poems, the utopic future imagined by other writers is disrupted by the realities of colonialism that will persist.

A number of poems in this fourth section of the book address questions of identity and blood quantum, perhaps suggesting that, as we turn to the future, these issues demand some sort of resolution, or at least acknowledgement. These will be familiar subjects to readers of Brings Plenty's past work. In *Real Indian Junk Jewelry*, issues of identity and

stereotype take poetic center stage, as do the very personal topics of romantic relationships that cause acute pain and addictions that overshadow and overtake a life. While there is some continuity between the books, of course, *Real Indian Junk Jewelry*, particularly in its earlier half, feels more intensely focused on the self, compared to these new poems.

In addition to bringing new subject matter to his poetry, Brings Plenty engages new forms in *Wakpá Wanáǵi*. Many of the poems continue the narrative style of his previous works, featuring long lines that are unrhymed, and stanzas with no line breaks; these poems read more like lyric narrative than strictly formed poetry. But in many of these new poems, the narrative has been condensed into a smaller space. It's as if Brings Plenty deploys poetic alchemy to condense the concepts into shorter, more powerful lines. The lines gain power from the multivalent nature of the words; sometimes it's their connotations that multiply meaning in these lines, and sometimes it's the flexibility of their grammatical function. For example, in many poems, words that we usually think of as nouns become verbs: cup, bottle, womb, map, hem, story. Sometimes it feels as if Brings Plenty is creating a new kind of villanelle; sometimes it feels as if he's the long-lost Lakota cousin of Emily Dickinson.

Whether formally compact or more loose and flowing, Brings Plenty's work is undeniably rooted in Lakota culture. Even as they address life in the city and the ways in which colonial processes have destroyed home and culture, the poems in *Wakpá Wanáǵi* assert the continuation of that culture through references to Lakota values or figures or events. For example, Iktomi shows up in several poems; the number four is emphasized in some of the poetic forms (four stanzas, or stanzas of four lines) as well as the structure of the book overall (four sections). Poems describe Ghost [Dance] shirts, make reference to the Sun Dance, note that participating in ceremony makes a huge difference, or none at all. And of course, there's the title of the book—a reference to the path that souls use to reach the afterlife, following the river of stars in the sky. The last poem of the book, "Ghost River" (80), brings the reader back to the title and to water and family, to links with the past and tradition, and hints of trauma:

I'm mostly water.
There has been family swept under by raw currents.

I'm from planters by the river.
We dredged riverbed bones.

We end where we began, it seems, in the world of water that signals nurturing (crops being watered) as well as violence (family being swept under). The Ghost River connects the speaker to his relatives, his ancestors, his homeland, his language, even as he gives witness that these things yield pain along with survival.

There's a lot more in *Wakpá Wanáǵi* to be moved by. I haven't even told you about the poem from the point of view of a speaker who is deciding what belongings to take after his relationship fails, its ring made of Black Hills gold a symbol that tempted trouble. Or

the poem that depicts a boy locked in an institution whose “one-on-one” counselor is the poet; as they walk outside, the boy finds two snakes and tries to bring them inside. This turns out to be a perfectly understandable thing when you see, as the poet does, that this boy is trying to hold onto family. There’s a whole world under this water that readers will find beautiful as well as painful, whose images and phrases will stick with you as you put the book down and think about your own place, your own family, your own time.

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