

A THOUSAND HORSES OUT TO SEA



Erika T. Wurth

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by Erika T. Wurth

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Reviewed by Thomas Hubbard

In *A Thousand Horses Out To Sea*, Erika Wurth has written a beautiful, painful story made of poems, a story lived over and over for years and years, in millions of variations by mixed blood NDNs and their friends in this America. It's a collection of vivid scenes in which most of us have sometime played a part. If your heart pumps any indigenous blood, or perhaps even if it doesn't, reading any one of these poems will bring a been-there grimace to your face or a nod of your head in affirmation.

Wurth's story starts early in her life—It started early in mine, too, and I remember chasing fireflies in the Indiana summer evenings with my white cousins. So this poem almost makes it rain.

Leaving the Glow

There are fireflies here,
and at sunset, they come out.
I think of my white cousins in New York,
how we chased them with jars
capturing them so we could watch them float,
and glow under our hands.

We were greedy and beautiful and even ideal,
our white hands and Indian hands praying the same way,

to the same light, our family watching from the dusty /
gray porch,
before everyone went off into their separate adulthoods,
leaving the glow of the evening far behind.

Unless you're a more perceptive reader than I, your first reading of this fine collection will register as just that: a collection of wonderful short poems, as visual as movies. If you only read it once, you got your money's worth. But read through it again, and pay close attention to the characters: I, you, she, he, etc.

You'll find them repeating, and come to know them a little. You'll see them interacting, and you'll know them a little better. You'll discover how all the poems are connected, and the characters as well. You'll see relationships come into focus.

These poems, this story, tells of love, but it also shows the physical, mental and spiritual violence that comes *with* love, coming to well-meaning people again and again, slipping in through fissures in their understanding, cracks in the structure of their family, chasms opened among their ancestors by the invaders . . . and opened sometimes by invaders being *among* their ancestors. The violence, just out of sight in most of these poems, emerges in a few, and in "Wild Blue Glory," emerges as a *need*.

I need someone to break me, shake me,
pull me apart. I need violence, blood and sap
running down my long, yellow arms . . .

Despite the fissures, the cracks, the chasms, one still must find a life and a love. Skin color or hair color seems so often to interrupt the search, however. Note (above) the "long yellow arms" of a mixed blood who lives out of the sun. The *mixed-blood* current running like a sensual river through these poems lends a shade of approach-avoid to the idea of crossing that race line. It becomes inescapable in the poem,

“In That Place That No Longer Exists.”

I touched you in that place that no longer exists,
in those lost white apartment buildings behind /
your father’s house,
your sad, almost Indian face moving drunkenly /
towards mine.

I gave you so little, and how you curved into yourself /
when I left,
the memory of your cold white hands in my black hair /
almost unbearable,
like something old and dusty . . .

Always, with the drinking, there is the danger, as in
“Spinning Them,” where Wurth identifies herself.

When the children are released into the waiting arms /
of the strangers
who have already drank too much
I am, wherever I am, the strange dark woman in /
the center,
holding them up and spinning them.

And when a love or a life ends, these characters must find
another, and another, until time comes to set out to that sea
not shown on maps. Wurth touches often on the important
factor of Indian-ness, the factor always running beneath the
surface and sometimes surfacing, as she explains in a gentle
voice in “Fort Peck Girl.”

On that night in the bar, she spoke about anger
and I touched my scars as the bodies wound all around /
us, she and I
only just beginning to measure the distances that exist /
between people
in bars, between everyone.

She, most beautiful Indian girl I've ever known. Fort /
Peck girl, body
straight as an arrow in the soil, her mother's initials /
tattooed on her
back, right beneath the great red wings of the /
thunderbird stretching
poetically above.

Those wings floated down as I helped her into her /
dress, yes,
the one she will wear at her altar, at his, at ours, the /
one we wear
under all of our wings when we love enough to risk /
bringing
down the first altar, the one that says we must worship
alone.

In such volatile lives, betrayal seems inescapable, and
it shines through the story's fabric in "Smoke Billowing."
Wurth describes herself figuratively, "Walking alone in the
Chicago night, / my worn red heels echoing in these wild
dusty streets . . ." And in the last stanza,

Yes, I am the woman we laughed about,
the tall, the yellow, angry dark haired woman,
I am full of your betrayal,
my face plastered on every window, every ancient black /
door,
I'm selling mangoes, horchata, sex, phone cards;
just another lonely Indian, posing as everything else,
searching for fire, smoke billowing out of me like a /
factory.

Then in "Safety Dream," the source of betrayal comes
to light.

And you, and you, with your sleepy child bride on /
the couch,
her small blond head resting on your arm
you think of my darkness,
the way my Indian hair filled the hollow of your neck,
my moans, my cries . . . my cries . . . inside me
grandmother closes her eyes as you enter, saying
the only way this works for me is to forget.
Yes, forget, forget, forget your strange whisper that you /
loved me,
quiet now, go to sleep, join her world on the couch. That /
safety dream,
the one, the only one, I never knew.

These poems speak of love—love as it happens between and among people whose world has been fractured by centuries of invasion, whose ancestors have been dispossessed, murdered, shoved aside. The love in these poems is a love ruptured and stretched, ruined but still binding lovers, families, peoples together, pulling and pushing them with a force that can splinter their souls, a love shining painful neon from gritty saloons across the land, reaching from one generation to the next with tortured echoes that resound through the history of a people dreadfully wronged and nevertheless surviving while their blood mixes with that of their invaders in progeny caught between two colliding worlds.

Some readers may encounter a bit of frustration in lacing these characters and this story together. Most will see it as invigorating exercise. You very well may look back on reading this book, to realize it began your understanding.