



Tacey M. Atsitty, *Rain Scald*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico, 2018. 88 pp. Paperback \$18.95. E-book \$9.99.

Tacey M. Atsitty's debut collection, *Rain Scald*, makes an important contribution to the impressive body of poetry recently published by Native American writers. Atsitty identifies herself as a Diné of the Sleep Rock People, born for the Tangle People, and the Navajo Nation is at once the setting of this book, a source for its myths and language, and an identity shared by the characters that people the poems. Atsitty's poems etch a landscape parched by climate change as well as the ravages of recent personal history and the longer history of the American government's marginalization of and violence against native peoples.

In her acknowledgements, Atsitty mentions her friend and mentor, Layli Long Soldier whose 2017 collection *Whereas* has perhaps influenced this collection most obviously in its use of indigenous languages. Long Soldier uses Lakota words in her poems, sometimes emphasizing her non-nativeness to that language, exploring her role as an ambassador of a language that remains, to some degree, non-native to her. Atsitty's use of Navajo is more integrated and insistent: she uses some words repeatedly, making it possible for her readers to begin to understand them from context. She presents these words as one would hear them spoken, blended with English, and puts us in the position of a child or a visitor learning bits of language by immersion.

Thematically, *Rain Scald* is perhaps most reminiscent of the Mojave poet Natalie Diaz's debut collection, *When My Brother Was an Aztec*. Both books portray a world in which people's desperation emerges as an abiding quality of life, and eventually of landscape. Both poets give narrative attention to child abuse and physical illness, getting at larger cultural crises through the lens of personal experience. Much of *Rain Scald*'s first section, "TSÉYI' Deep in Rock," concerns a neglectful father who ultimately abandons the speaker with her younger siblings in the devastating poem, "Playground at Sunset." Atsitty writes, "I thought it was a treat to be left / for hours, to seesaw the day / away," and by the end of the poem, "I learned not to answer my little sister / until sunset calmed our skin, ready / for a deep bruise to fill the night. // 'Soon.'" This poem, like her use of Navajo words, asks us to discover the reality of the child speaker's situation alongside her. We begin the poem no wiser than she is, making a positive association with the playground, and detouring with her through her crush on a boy and soaring on a seesaw where her younger siblings, she is relieved, are happy: "*They* were in the sky, / yee-hawing in the clouds." The poem delivers simultaneously the realization that the father is not returning and the fact that his absence transfers responsibility for her two younger siblings to her. She experiences this abandonment not only as a child but also as a proxy guardian, unable to control the outcome, but trying, nevertheless, to control her siblings' experience and to mitigate their fear.

In an early poem, "Ach'íí," which refers to a delicacy made from sheep intestine wrapped around fat, the speaker tells us her

Dad's baby brother, his intestines

broke, and he couldn't pee.

He died because he was so full.
Just like his grandmother,
the day she walked out of the hogan,
dropped to her knees, holding her
stomach—so mixed up inside
when it exploded.

By referring to the speaker's uncle as "Dad's baby brother," Atsitty reinforces the idea from "Playground at Sunset" that young people may be pressed into playing the role of caregivers—that a sibling can also be one's "baby." She quickly moves on, however, to create an analogy between the Navajo food that is the title of the poem and a physical illness that has killed two close family members in shocking and agonizing ways. This poem also, by narrating the death of the (great) grandmother, establishes the narrative background of the later prose poem, "Calico Prints," which follows the speaker's great-grandmother through her death, and gives us the reason for her illness: "It was the water she drank, soaked in tailings." This extremely subtle gesture is how Atsitty alerts us to another aspect of the contemporary epidemic of environmental contamination and destruction. Water, the commodity whose scarcity is ever more dire, ends this poem, "her children tracked staggered footprints to the wash's edge." She reminds us again that it is often children who pay for the dangers their parents cannot avoid facing.

Water is, appropriately, a motif in this collection that is dynamic but always a substrate for the troubles that beset the speaker and her people. In "In Dishwater" the speaker remembers boiling water to wash dishes as a girl and remarks that when she submerges in water, the scars from a lifetime of burns "only then [] become visible to me." But these scars are from "leg to scalp," and thus indicate more than the scaldings she often failed to notice at the time, a lifetime of injuries left, in their specificity, to our imaginations. "At Evil Canyon" begins, "Where I'm going there is no water," and water becomes a phantom capable of inciting visions: "a saliva sojourn along the wall...shark head emerges from canyon...to know your hands is to dip them / into lake clouds, a rock-deep cool." Throughout these poems, the speaker negotiates less what she finds than what she is aware has been lost through the history of her people, beginning with relocations to arid land and continuing through economic and environmental devastation. *Rain Scald* is particularly powerful at illuminating the realities of a marginalized community because of the subtlety with which Atsitty makes her critiques and the opposing directness of her engagement with her personal history. Formally varied, the language in these poems is always rich with layered meaning. This allows her to handle her subject matter delicately and to braid the English of her academic study of poetry with the language, myth, and poetic tradition of her Navajo culture.

Jasmine V. Bailey
Texas Tech University