

In the Shadow of the Iron Horse

A Young Voice in Poetry: Erika T. Wurth

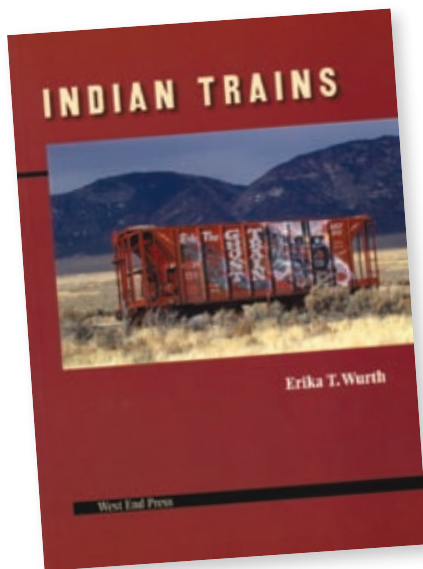
Review by Barbara Sorensen

Glancing at the cover of Erika T. Wurth's book of poems, *Indian Trains*, one is struck by the photo of an abandoned, graffiti-sprayed boxcar sitting steadfastly in the middle of semi arid plains. Painted across this red-rusted remnant in bold white vertical letters are the words "Ghost Train." The photo alone is enough to conjure the chilling history of the "iron horse," which helped eradicate the Great Plains Indian cultures. But Wurth, with her sharp wit and edgy awareness of irony, is set from the start to sever stereotypes and challenge the reader to recognize, as she has through her remarkable craft, the 21st-century Indian. Her opening poem, "Grandma Was a Beat Poet," makes this clear. "I'm uncomfortable with the way grandmothers are portrayed in poems," she admits. "I wanted my grandmother to come across as she was—an actual person rather than a two-dimensional 'Indian Grandmother' terminally making frybread." And so the journey through Wurth's poems is filled with relatives who emerge from cities, small towns, reservations, mountain hamlets and deserts. She writes of sweetgrass and sunsets, but there is also the forthright image of an Indian great-grandfather who worked on the railroads and a grandmother who wrote beat poetry and lost a finger working in a factory. Wurth, Apache/Chickasaw/Cherokee, explains, "Lots of Indians worked on trains because of the steady pay and good insurance."



Erika T. Wurth

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A quick perusal of history from the 19th century onward reveals the devastating irony of Indians working side by side with Asian immigrants in grading the railroad tracks that facilitated the demise of bison herds, depleted trees and forever altered the landscape, ushering in settlers and an assortment of opportunists. Pawnee, Shoshone and Paiute endured the intense labor for 15 cents a day and the promise of free passage on the trains. Other tribes, like the Northern Cheyenne, Apache and Lakota, kept an ever-present watch over the symbol of Manifest Destiny and periodically led raids on railroad workers in attempts to thwart its progress.

Though the image of the railroad and all of its conflicting history and accompanying metaphors loom large, this book of poems is not about the history of railroads and Indians. Instead, the railroad acts as an emotional backdrop through which Wurth explores situations that weave in and out of humor and sadness, longing and hope. Her characters are real people, grounded by human flaws, some of whom she must inevitably leave behind. As Wurth travels optimistically forward in her own personal ghost train, poems trail along with a distinct, repetitive thrum: “the train the train the train/I’ve always lived by an Indian train..../I can still hear that long low whistle in the distance.”

Writing What People Don't See

Wurth was born in Los Angeles, but lived most of her life in Colorado. Denver, the city that is a crossroads for nearly 25,000 Indians representing many different tribes, is an enigma. On any given day, the Indian presence seems invisible. When asked about this, Wurth says, “The four corner states, Colorado, Utah, New Mexico and Arizona, all have different histories. Colorado, of course did a ‘sweeping out’ (Sand Creek Massacre), and I think that this allows people to assume that most Indians live on reservations. This is simply not true.” With this statement firmly implanted in her explanation, Wurth asserts, “As my friend Layli Long Soldier, Lakota, said of her own poetry, ‘I

wanted to write the stories that I wasn’t seeing.’”

Wurth acquired her undergraduate degree at Fort Lewis College in Durango, Colorado; her master’s degree at the University of Toledo in Ohio; and her doctorate from the University of Colorado, at Boulder. She teaches creative writing at Western Illinois University in Macomb, Illinois. Wurth’s list of poets she admires is eclectic and diverse: Kim Addonizio, Billy Collins, Sherman Alexie, James Welch and Lorna Dee Cervantes.

Accepting What is Real

Though Wurth is ensconced in academia, her poetry is not in the least bit influenced by trends or the lingering appeal of “language poetry,” which inevitably takes itself too seriously. Wurth’s irreverence is refreshing: “If you don’t get the cosmic joke, you’re screwed,” she laughs. “My poems reflect a constant transformation in people. Different voices speak to different communities.” Just as she is uncomfortable with how Indian grandmothers are too often depicted in poetry, so too is Wurth wary of people prying into religion. “Though I think some sense of religion is alluded to in my work, I try to back off of constant discussion of specific religious practices. It’s personal and incredibly diverse. Some of us are traditionalists, some Native American Church members, some Methodists. There’s so much interest in our religions that it makes me uneasy.”

The mystical is clearly not what Wurth’s poems explore. Although the past is always present in her poems, it acts as a lucid pathway to scenarios that include ghostly John Wayne movies, homeless urban Indians selling furniture on Denver street corners, powwows and fancydancing, Indian cowboys at rodeos, Indian women who cut themselves, their scars revealing stories: diabetes, alcoholism, drug abuse. With simple heartbreaking language, Wurth delicately introduces us to people she loved and lost: “My hands were like angels/holding the phone that day that you called/asking if I’d seen the sunset.../M, how you ran and how you died inside/and how much I wanted to see you flower/and love your beautiful skin, how you touched mine/and listened to

those family stories, my apartment filled with the smell of sweetgrass and the smell of your sweet Indian skin.”

Wurth is a young poet whose voice alights gracefully on the page. She knows she is a survivor, but there is no celebration in her tone. Language is used plainly and poignantly as in “Leaving the Garden Wild”:

*In Colorado, my love, it has rained
for 40 days and 40 nights,
the water running in the streets
like an ocean, rushing down the
sidewalks, lost,
completely lost.*

*Even the weather here has biblical
ramifications.*

*When you left, the sun trailed after
you, behind the flatirons,
though I didn't know it at the time.*

*Now I see that it was one of your
many secrets.*

*In my old apartment, the floors
covered in wood, sweetgrass still
hanging in the air,*

*the walls blank now that I am gone
too, you touched me*

*for the first time, your hands burning
like the desert sun into my hair.*

Here too, innocence was lost.

Whatever or whoever has been lost by the people who inhabit her world, Wurth reclaims and pulls along with her. Her poems are built with strong shoulders and their motion emulates a long train winding its vigilant way toward cohesion. In the short poem “Old Guitar and Alcohol,” Wurth moves beyond her father’s hard-working fists that “move up and down like the pistons on a train,” to her own hands, which hold forgiveness in abundance:

*Your Indian daughter loves you more
than ever before dad*

*Picking up where you left off...
old guitar and alcohol.*

*I hold this instrument in the exact
way*

*I held you
awkwardly, and with love. ❖*

Barbara Sorensen is senior editor of Winds of Change magazine.

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