

**Michael Wasson. *This American Ghost*. YesYes Books, 2017. 45 pp. ISBN: 9781936919529. <https://www.yesyesbooks.com/product-page/this-american-ghost>.**

Michael Wasson's poetry collection, *This American Ghost*, is both visceral and lyrical, taking its reader on a passionate, painful journey of decolonization. By weaving together English and nimipuutimt, Wasson conveys both personal and cultural truths, particularly those that speak to the damages done by US settler colonialism.

The collection begins with an epigraph from *The Iliad*, a mourning Achilles telling Agamemnon, "We are the closest to the dead, / we'll see to all things here" (n.p.). This quote underscores two major themes of Wasson's work: death and intimacy. Images of murder, suicide, and cultural genocide play along the collection's pages, and the pain of those affiliated losses is depicted in exquisitely lyrical passages. The fact that Wasson chooses to quote Achilles, in mourning for his beloved Patroclus who he will avenge, highlights the simmering passion to come. "The Confession," "Ant & Yellow Jacket," and "Another Confession" all describe the pleasures of intimate physical love, yet "Another Confession" also juxtaposes love and death: "there's a word I am / trying to tell you while the dead / skin melts into me / like ghosts / unable to confess their sins" (11). "The Sacrifice" also achieves this juxtaposition: "The sky / once a torn skin like ink starred / with the whited pupils of the dead" and "The beauty of two bodies / reaching into each other" (4). There is an imminent pain shading these early pieces, suggesting more trauma in the latter works.

The titles of "The Confession" and "The Sacrifice" speak to another persistent theme: the ideology of Christianity, or a kind of repudiation of it. Both "Confession" poems are less about requesting forgiveness for earthly sins than unabashed celebrations of physical love such as the first's "Show me / how your mouth moves under / my hard-edged flesh" (1). A quote from Corinthians is the epigraph for "Redemption," and the poem begins with another reference to confession. Yet this poem details the speaker's brother's attempted suicide and suffering, posing the musings of a ghost, "*how to change all these years of loss*" (25). Redemption comes presumably with the sacrifice of a deer at the poem's end, shot by the persona, bringing a "lightening" of the night (26). The theme of the brother's suicide continues in the collection's final poem "Mouthed," in which the same gun that offers up the deer's life also takes the brother's. The speaker asks,

Is that not you  
I hear drowning  
in the living  
room & hunched down

to what  
we never called *god*" (33).

More overt repudiations of Christianity come in "In Winters, As Ghosts" in which the speaker's mother says, "*there's no hell*" as the loss of loved ones punctuates the chill of winter nights. Such personal loss is underscored with intergenerational trauma, as suggested by the allusion to Chief Joseph from his 1877 surrender to the US Army, "Maybe I shall find them among the dead," (37). "The World Already Ended at Y2K" turns on the irony that settler colonialism is already its own apocalypse, as suggested by the first lines, "The silence of the reservation / could fill me / to the point of breaking . . ." (29); the poem warns that there will be no otherworldly redemption, no

arch  
angel here to drag you  
off to hell or purgatory or even  
paradise . . ." (29).

The most fascinating piece to decolonize Christian ideology is "On the Horizon," in which the speaker undoes Biblical language such as

& I said  
let there be dark  
pouring from your mouth  
at day break" (9).

The poem contains similar allusions to the plague of locusts and the Garden of Eden, ultimately throwing off Christianity altogether: "Let another god / forget you were ever born" (9).

These themes of passion, death, and spirituality cannot be separated from the cultural experiences of the *nimípuu* (Nez Perce). Wasson's ubiquitous use of *nimipuutímt* throughout the collection requires the reader to become immersed in the in-betweenness of contemporary US Indigenous experience. For example, the poem "Lit in the Mouth or For the Old Woman Who Died of Song & Loneliness" borrows language from a *nimipuutímt* story in order to expand the personal borders of the recurrent themes of loss, trauma, and the confession of that pain. One of the most compelling pieces in the collection, "The Exile," imagines the experience of Nez Perce elder Titus Paul at the Chilocco Indian Boarding School in Oklahoma in 1922 (37). Though the poem is clearly a lyrical envisioning of that historical moment, it maintains the confessional tone of much of the collection with its first person perspective. "The Exile" contains familiar details of Indian boarding school experience—forced loss of language and culture through brutal forms of discipline—yet, the syntactic gymnastics used to convey these horrors is heart-rending:

because they can     tear every lip from every memory  
of your mother  
because you are  
torn & because you are  
what song fills  
your throat  
with the color  
of carved out tongue” (15).

Michael Wasson’s *This American Ghost* is a collection for lovers of language who are willing to examine the physical intimacies and violences that play out in our most personal relationships. The use of syllabic form places emphasis on individual words, and the ways meaning can turn when words are isolated or paired in surprising ways. Throughout this wordplay runs an unflinching examination of tragedy and how we cope with it. Often, in these poems, that coping occurs in an engagement with the natural world: a deer, the horizon, the morning light, or the winter cold. How such an approach demonstrates human capacity to understand and accept loss can be seen in this powerful, poignant line: “Who is it the dead / remember? the moon / finally asks me” (24). *This American Ghost* makes clear that personal tragedies are intricately connected to realms beyond our individual experiences—to our cultures, our nations, our natural world.

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