

**UCLA**

**American Indian Culture and Research Journal**

**Title**

(At) Wrist

**Permalink**

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/5gt9f71s>

**Journal**

American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 47(3)

**ISSN**

0161-6463

**Author**

Jackson, Cj

**Publication Date**

2024-12-01

**DOI**

10.17953/A3.34840

**Copyright Information**

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial License, available at

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

## REVIEWS



(At) **Wrist**. By Tacey M. Atsitty. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2023. 84 pages. \$17.95 paper.

Broken into three sections identified by parentheses that drift closer as we read on—“( ),”“( )”—until it crosses—“( )”—Tacey M. Atsitty’s second poetry collection (At) *Wrist* points us to the joint. For Atsitty, wrists are an emblem for a soul flayed—“tonight my wrists part, and you chase my insides / until they dangle into pieces” (5)—; for a treasure chest hiding Diné stories and histories—“you’ll pull up the entire lawn / of forest, leaving only skinfolds / of earthen mounds, carved out / wrist story of Monster Slayer” (6)—; a casket mourning the familial bonds between the speaker and her mother and sister—“in bloodline throughout our wrists telling of the same / mother who left / us” (25)—; and for lacing, where the wrist becomes the stitching that secures all the frayed edges of the speaker’s life together—“We came and went, as if we were lace for the breaking, / our lives rounding out likes arcs of our wrists” (49). Atsitty speaks about the wrist as a part of the body unnoticed, neglected; and in turn, transforms it into a place of memories, a backdoor into a forgotten room filled with old, strange, and banal things that charge a passing moment into something perpetual.

Such moments are captured in “Candy Dish Sonnet,” where the parentheses make a reappearance to form a heart-shaped candy dish: “( )—a cleaning out / ( ) a scratch in the grain, table” (34). The poem opens with a metaphor of a dish being “combed bare” for cacao and almonds and ends with the speaker purchasing butcher’s meat, which eventually becomes picked “naked as bone china” by crows (34). The scene as a whole narrates the potential feeling of injury that occurs when making oneself vulnerable to love and reaches for “any sweet filling” simultaneously (34). A similar dish reappears in the poem “Portrait of the Gray Room,” its tone mournful, grieving the time passing. “There is nothing I can do,” the speaker laments, describing to us “leaves [that] / have gone wilted & pages dust- / covered from years of howling” (44). Other materials—a love poem, an absentee ballot (new and faded), the story of Chang Er, “yolk-filled lunar / cakes”—litter a “glass bowl / in dishwater” that slips from the speaker’s hands, from her fingers (45). Although the word is never mentioned, readers are called to make connections between the bowls and the wrist. Objects in (At) *Wrist* become a way for bringing the body forefront and making flesh material, but also for expanding our notions of what home is and what makes a home. It stresses how the wrist bruises, aches; how it literally, at times, carries the weight of temporal nostalgia and performs as the most important corridor for building attachments, those which are located in memory and affect, and those found in people.

From the epitaph, Atsitty writes in her dedication: “To shizhéé / and / every man who extended me his wrist.” Central to the portrayal of relations at the wrist is the connections the speaker has to the men in her life—her father, her son, an unnamed

romantic partner, even Christ. In one scene, the speaker recounts her father teaching her how to brace corn stalks in the fall and, in another, wakes her up to go running in “moon-dark cold” winter morning (30). Through her father, the speaker even shares her clan: “I’m born / for my father, Tangle People” (5). For Atsitty, the wrist can operate as an escape route, an offer of refuge and safety that emerges from paternal relationships. This comfort translates over onto her speaker’s son. In “Pollenback,” the speaker’s son gently whispers “Bees, bees” while sitting in his car seat at a stoplight, watching the bugs “vocal or / dance fly / at the petal” in the springtime, and pointing us not only toward the environmental attentiveness in all its catastrophe and wonder but the inexpressible joy of learning to make noise. The speaker herself shares in this experience in the poem “The Warbler,” as she tells us that “the only place / I’m comfortable in is silence, is when I sing to open land” (38). In committing time to mapping out the landscapes of the Navajo Nation—through snow, animals, corn, and more—we learn through each change of season the importance of the speaker’s relationship to those around her.

Resting alongside other contemporary Native poets, including Jake Skeets, Sherwin Bitsui, Alicia Elliott, and Natalie Diaz, *(At) Wrist* tests the limits of our understanding of vulnerability, tenderness, loss, and grief through the wrist. Drifting through various scenes and textures that create what is basically a portrait of everyday living, this collection is a delicious change of pace in Indigenous poetics where the traditional sonnet—its form, its voice, its body—becomes the poet’s playground for invoking Diné aesthetics and histories into its lines. Poems tarry from ceremonial moments of a baby’s first snow bathing to their first laughing celebration to recalling creation stories and braiding bark around the wrists. These occasions might not be obvious to readers unfamiliar with Native literature, or more specifically Diné literature, but the language still seduces, lingering on a question, unasked and unnamed, of what a twenty-first century Diné experience is, and making it the kind of collection poetry readers hunger for. *(At) Wrist* takes its title seriously, emphasizing how the joint can stand for a kind of reciprocity between people and places, and reminding us that vulnerability is a risk that must be taken for building thoughtful connections.

Cj Jackson

University of California, Davis