

Unsure the Taste of Words

Contingency Plans: Poems

David Wheeler

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Review by Thomas Turner II



In the prose that serves as the preface to the first section of poetry in David Wheeler's *Contingency Plans*, the poet confesses, "When I say I write in seasons... I mean that I am opening every door to a sanctuary to which I convince myself others have already found access." Wheeler presents his poetry in collections of different seasons, each section of his book is a thematically

tight and cohesive unit that poetically serves as a "temporary testament to how grace has made right" where the poet got things wrong. This grace-infused view of poetry is the lens through which each of Wheeler's five sections can be read, as different stages of life thrust the poet into creating through the catalyst of grace in surprising ways.

Loneliness haunts the first section of Wheeler's work, starting with a recounting of an awkward conversation where the poet serves as a third wheel in an exchange about poetic form. The voice in these poems confesses to insomnia, seclusion, and "drinking more / than a French press alone." Even when the poems in this section include interaction with another person the distance is noticeable, a barrier that is present between the poet and other people. Water is an image of how grace allows the narrator to connect with others. In the poem "Forecast," grace is a "torrent" that comes "at no one's

behest," but unlike rain it does not soak through and damage. In "The Chance of Rain," water, after soaking through clothes, is what sweeps the narrator into a relationship. Water shows up in other poems as well, as something to be feared for its ability to damage, and as a reminder that a man who seeks shelter from the rain is isolated from a world of "people linked to people."

Water is just one of the natural elements that give Wheeler's poems most of their weight. The natural world is a constant focus of the poet's writing. Wheeler writes that "God is in the wilderness, and the tabernacle choir, and everywhere in between." He focuses especially on the interplay of nature and time in the last four sections. The steady flow of time is seen in the wear of blankets at a cabin. The fiddleheads and pines "reach upward" and remind us that "the stories go further back." The poet alludes to time and nature directly in the pithy observation in "On Providence" that "I never thought of snow before; / now it's all I remember." In "Zuanich Point" a similar sentiment is shared in the lines: "we remember the seasons because they pass." The adventure for the poet though, is that time and the seasons "keep us guessing," like in "Divide Wisdom, MT" when a winter storm whites out the narrator's vision until

...there were only hills
and highway—me, alone,
southbound, thinking aloud,
unsure the taste of words.

Guessing and grace go together in Wheeler's poetry, especially in the third and fifth sections, which are more explicitly spiritual than the other sections. The poems "Lent" and "Eschaton" reflect how contemplation brings about a mixture of faith and doubt. In "Lent," the opening lines "Tomorrow is Ash Wednesday, and / I am already empty," point out the irony of being empty on what should be the last feast day, Shrove Tuesday, before actual fasting begins. In this emptiness, the narrator, in juxtaposition to the first section, yearns to be relational:



Call me brother. Console me
with a gentle grip on my shoulder
or slap me on my back...

Guessing and grace commingle in “Eschaton,” that while we may “watch the / sky for signs that our / time here is over” we find consolation in water, again a symbol for grace, as “we wait for a single tidal wave to refresh, restart the / earth, so maybe all the / old things will be new.”

The full force of Wheeler’s poetry comes in his careful use of form to construct an internal rhythm that gives a heavy, meditative cadence to his strongest poems. It is a surprising feat to have arguably the strongest poems in the work to all be poems in strict poetic form when so much of the poet’s book contains modern style poetry that is focused more on image, sound and symbol. The two villanelles “Sunday Morning Bread” and “Prayers for Friends” join with the pantoum “Lullaby for the Sunshine Silver Mine” as haunting contemplations of mortality and relationship. In “Lullaby,” mountains become funeral pyres and canaries continue to sing in a sleep

Lent
from *Contingency Plans*

Tomorrow is Ash Wednesday, and
I am already empty.
Soot shrouds my brow, evenly,
a note left by a soul lent
to a warden who didn’t want it.

Call me brother. Console me
with a gentle grip on my shoulder,
or slap me on my back and knock
a small, fragile fragment
of faith or hope or love loose.

I’ve given up so many things.

that is really death, reminding us that nature absorbs our death once we close “heavy eyes.” The Eucharist is the central image in both villanelles, reminding us that “we might absorb from each other, maybe, / as intinction reminds us we are not alone” but it is hard not to glare

...at Grace, sitting deaf and dumb
at the corner of the table while we sit and shout,
.....
while we refuse to even taste the honey
or any food before us, and instead doubt,
clutching hands, praying for the kingdom come.

In this juxtaposition of doubt and faith, guessing and grace, Wheeler possesses a poetic voice that crafts careful introspection, the raw, natural beauty of the West and a contemplative spirituality into verse that welcomes equally contemplative reading, no contingency plan is required.

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