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“To Stop the Great Unravelling”

Invasive Species by CLAIRE CALDWELL

Buckridger Books, 2014 \$18.00

Reviewed by EMILY MCGIFFIN

As its title suggests, Claire Caldwell’s debut poetry collection is preoccupied with an environmental dilemma, namely with a particular invasive species that has inserted itself into formerly functional ecosystems, modifying habitats and usurping inhabitants according to its needs and preferences. The cover illustration portrays the species in variations of a pose: a series of “seventeen men hunched like tree frogs” (13). The association complicates the matter, adding a layer of amphibian sensitivity to a collection that deals with the invasive species’ more obvious traits: omnivorous, mobile, highly adaptable, and with a penchant for collecting shiny things (including, for example, pet corgis).

The title poem, together with “See Also: Arctic Shrinkage,” which precedes it, introduces the first of the book’s many populations of creatures that dwell at the margins of modernity’s landscapes. Seeking ways to inhabit an environment that has occluded them, cougars scale condos, moths coat power lines, bears go clad in pearls and polyester. The opening poems also introduce the predominant style of the collection: sequences of often disparate images accreted into textured conglomerates that capture and hold the reader’s attention, displaying unexpected shapes within a complex whole.

From “Invasive Species,” the collection moves into “Grizzly Woman,” a series addressed to Amie Huguenard, the late girlfriend of renowned “Grizzly Man” Timothy Treadwell. While Treadwell’s

fateful story garnered plenty of media attention, including a critically-acclaimed film, Huguenard, who perished alongside Treadwell during their final summer in Alaska, remains a relatively unknown figure. The homage is a warning of the danger not only of hubris but also of complicity. In this poem, the speaker’s repeated references to her fears—“I felt my own heat like a diner / after midnight. A splash of neon / beside a dark highway” (6)—indicate her acute unease with the situation but also an awareness of her vulnerable place within a broader natural order. Daily confrontation with one’s own mortality can be uncomfortable, to say the least. The poem reminds us that, by and large, the constructed landscapes of middle-class North America are designed to shield us from the experience.

This sense of mortality, of transience, runs through the collection, from “There is Nothing Left of your Great-Grandfather” to the masterful closing sequence “Osteogenesis.” In this final long poem, Caldwell vividly and attentively describes the death and gradual decomposition of a blue whale, splicing the multigenerational, biodiverse process with the speaker’s interactions with a medical student friend in the process of dissecting a cadaver. As human layers are uncovered, so the whale’s body passes through a slow succession of inhabitation by creatures that dismember and devour it. The result is a reverberating contemplation on impermanence, the multiple scales of time, the fragility of even the most massive of creaturely bodies, and the complicated ways in which living species remain irascibly intertwined, cohabiting with the dead.

The back cover copy praises Caldwell’s freshness, the images and language that dodge any hint of poetic

cliché. This is certainly true; throughout the collection, her originality is startling and thought-provoking. At the same time, there were points where I found the imagery too sparse and fleeting to lead me deeper into the world of the poems. This was the case for “Fever of Unknown Origin,” which comprised a series of cryptic images from Egypt and Israel—“Gods’ bellies / plump with sparrows. A slice of orange, half-licked. / A blond boy shoves a pistol / between limestone lips. . . . You’re Gatorade resistant, / the fever unexplained” (11)—culminating with the speaker’s flight home. There is an intriguing irony to the insistence on gazing at skinny dogs, kittens, sand dunes—at the mundane, rather than the larger-than-life monuments—at Luxor. Yet I found both the images and their patchwork assembly puzzling; they seemed disjointed, pointing in scattered directions rather than drawing out the potentially intricate set of ideas within the poem. Caldwell’s aim may

be precisely to create an atmosphere of ambiguity that leaves the reader confused, but, given the rich material she is working with, I find myself asking why.

Overall, these are tight, well-crafted poems constructed with a careful attention to rhythm and form that aptly amplify the intelligence of the language and themes. Infused with a complex blend of levity and gravitas, they aim high beams at an ordinary world, illuminating its disregarded angles. These are poems to be collected, for certainly they shine.

EMILY MCGIFFIN is a doctoral candidate in York University’s Faculty of Environmental Studies where she is examining the cultural politics of extractive capitalism and South African praise poetry. Her most recent poetry collection, *Subduction Zone* (Pedlar Press, 2014), was awarded the 2015 ASLE Environmental Creative Book Award.