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Erin Linn McMullan
UBC

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Born Out of This by CHRISTINE LOWTHER
Caitlin Press, 2014 \$21.95

Reviewed by ERIN LINN MCMULLAN

“Vancouver Island’s west coast is wild, arguably romantic, but never quaint” (31), says Christine Lowther in her memoir, *Born Out of This*. For Lowther, Clayoquot Sound becomes the epicentre of activism, the healing power of nature and creative inspiration as she discovers her way through and growing in wonder with every wild encounter with a world whose mysterious beauty is inherent in its untamability. Lowther fearlessly confronts the “impenetrable green wall of forest” through which a cougar slips stealthy as a ghost to meet her “cat-face to human-face” and “meow?” while shading its eyes from her gaze (49-51).

Seamlessly blending memoir, nature writing, and a punk sensibility, *Born Out of This* is a collection of new and updated personal essays exploring such liminal spaces at our world’s edge. Over three sections: “Floating Season,” “Asphalt Season,” and “Merge,” Lowther initiates us into her unique coastal lifestyle. We follow her from the floathouse she calls “Gratitude” and occupies during summer months, “rooted” offshore of Tla-o-qui-aht traditional Tribal Park, Meares Island, to living in-town with her community in Tofino during tempestuous winter storms that can set the ‘float’ adrift, sending solar panels into the chuck and kayaks literally up the creek (115).

While Lowther accepts nature’s “indifference” (95) to her presence, she also shatters that boundary between when diving into brisk bioluminescent waters to swim with a seal in “Living Light,” or bushwhacking onshore beyond the

shadowed sentry of coastal bears and wolves in “Origins of a Dreamcatcher.” Here, beyond the wall, she enters a “landscape of disorder” resplendent with starflowers and western bog laurel blooms. She spies a rare pink frog and imagines in the drumming of a ruffed grouse’s wings: “Faeries. Sasquatch. D’Sonoqua. Green Man. Ancestors. Ghosts” (67-68).

Never trespassing, she instead invites “contact,” saying “I did not have to wait long for the seal to come to me. . . . A quick, careful flipper grazed my heel. That was all, and that was enough” (63).

Two inciting incidents bring her to this intersection between worlds: choosing Tofino to settle down in during “house arrest” after participating in the Clayoquot blockades in ’92, and watching a “blue, barn-shaped cabin” sail by as it is being towed up the inlet—the same floathouse she and her ex-partner will come to purchase and call home (31-33).

I soon learned that my new life would be anything but sedentary, although it was rooted—anchored. Together, the wind and sea would rock us to sleep after long days of fixing up the place. Every moment floating would become precious. (34)

Faced with a two-hour paddle through “a strong tide” and “vicious white waves” to commute to work in town, fortunately, Lowther had earlier signed herself and her partner up for the lessons that also would yield the book’s title and a controlling conceit—facing a big swell during an exercise in “self-rescue” a fellow initiate advocates she pray to Venus, who was “born out of this” tumult (75).

Lowther's tumult or core wound is the loss of her murdered mother, the poet Pat Lowther, at the hands of Christine's father. In her womb, she was first carried to peace rallies and taught early "to protest the needless destruction of trees" (16). Most poignant is this intergenerational and intertextual dialogue between daughter and mother, which characterizes these essays and Lowther's own prolific body of work. Her mother-mentor remains a kind of spirit guide in her approach to life and their shared craft as Lowther matures into an identity of her own.

"I didn't know my mother wanted to live on a houseboat until after I was living on one myself," says Lowther in "Destination Gratitude." While here she imagines her mother would have preferred to be anchored instead near Vancouver's "urban literary scene . . . surely she would have loved this life, a cabin on the sea. Perhaps more poems about hermit crabs, anemones and jellyfish would have followed" (41).

A keen observer of her marine environs, Lowther applies her own mix of marvel and humour to "Attack of the Killer Pink Sea Star." Describing their resemblance to "unhinged aliens," she asks if this "deadly predator" from the class Asteroidea even belongs here on earth (54)? Toying further with this sci-fi motif, she compares the gunpowder star "humped up over clumps of filament worms" to a "Klingon enjoying gagh" and infuses a hint of apprehension describing the ravenous pink star's opportunistic consumption of "phallic geoducks" or a pail of oysters dropped accidentally overboard. (54-55)

In "Loving Eik," Lowther recounts planting herself firmly in the fall zone when downtown Tofino's 800-year-old tree was slated for destruction. Only after two young

men offer to scale and occupy 'Eik' does she leave her post. But her fierce willingness to commit is illustrated when she later climbs through her fear to reach "the first big branch 26 metres up" and join them on the makeshift net of their "balcony."

I wouldn't look anywhere but at the bark before my face, in case the faraway ground met my eyes . . . I didn't stay long. I was so looking forward to being grounded again that the moment of going over the edge was welcome. Then, wheee! all the way down. (92)

In "Gifts from Lands So Far Apart" Lowther courageously confronts her memories of her father when, on his arrest, she and her sister are "pulled from our father's arms on the dock at Miner's Bay" and whisked by "police vessel to a . . . foster home." Later, as an adult "fascinated with uncovering secrets of our past," she accompanies a documentary film crew to his hometown of Britannia Bay, whose mine "was now one of the worst polluters in North America" (23). "The place where I've ended up is wetter, chillier, and with its coniferous forests, a tad more abrasive," Lowther says when comparing it to the Mayne Island of her childhood. "Though I barely knew my mother, I feel certain she would have loved it" (27).

In "Generally Giving a Damn," Lowther reports from the mosh pit in her 40s, tracing back her punk roots to that breakthrough moment in grade 12 when she first attended a D.O.A. concert—music that expressed the same anger she felt "at Mulrone, Reagan, British prime minister Margaret Thatcher and their nuclear arms race that kept me up at night" (133). It was a trajectory that launched her first zine,

Cheeky Rebel, moving to the UK, going vegan and immersing herself in punk subculture while having her eyes opened to “poverty issues and dirty fingers in dirty pies” (138). She brought that growing awareness back to Canada on her return.

“But,” she challenges the reader, “if anyone thinks it’s not punk to live out in nature they should visit during a storm” (144). “Maybe retreating here is hiding. Maybe it is being free to express emotion,” says Lowther of the floathouse where she wrote the bulk of her memoir (95).

Lowther has come full circle, once again in 2015 protesting logging in the Walbran Valley which threatens to take down ancient ‘Tolkien-like’ trees—a position now fully backed by the town of Tofino, “who can really see the benefit of having protested the government’s plans for logging an area,” according to Mayor Josie Osbourne (CBC.ca).

While Lowther’s memoir, *Born Out of This*, clearly evidences a mature self-

possession in her craft and point-of-view, she is still fighting the good fight, albeit, as these essays chronicle, a bit further down the road on her own healing journey, as a result of her willingness to continue confronting the past, her fears, and injustice.

Works Cited

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ERIN LINN MCMULLAN worked as story editor on the Ewan McGregor narrated IMAX *Humpback Whales 3D* and on OMNI TV documentary *Cold Paradise*, as well as for 5 years as writer-editor for *Reach for the Top*, TV’s high school quiz show. A recent graduate of UBC’s MFA in Creative Writing with a focus on screen, she lives with her dogs, Wolf and Owl, in Tofino, BC.