

2-29-2016

Field Notes for the Alpine Tundra by Elena Johnson

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Recommended Citation / Citation recommandée

Caldwell, Claire. "Field Notes for the Alpine Tundra by Elena Johnson." *The Goose*, vol. 14, no. 2, article 15, 2016,
<https://scholars.wlu.ca/thegoose/vol14/iss2/15>.

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***Field Notes for the Alpine Tundra* by ELENA JOHNSON**

Gaspereau Press, 2015 \$17.95

Reviewed by **CLAIRE CALDWELL**

Field Notes for the Alpine Tundra is quite a literal title for Elena Johnson's collection of poems from her time as poet-in-residence at an isolated ecology research station in the Yukon's Ruby Range. The poems document the scientific work done during her stay and daily moments in the mountains, but the preposition in the title also suggests this book is a gift to the animals, plants and landscape that shaped these poems. Though Johnson's "field notes" are ostensibly about the ecology of this region, the give-and take of researching, writing, and simply existing in the alpine tundra is central to the collection.

Often resembling jotted notes or taking the form of charts, diagrams and graphs, Johnson's poems mimic scientific documents, sometimes even quoting actual studies. The spare, direct language and the compactness of the poems also evoke the landscape itself: rugged, unadorned and seemingly stunted, "no sheep, no bear. / A few spruce scraggle the bottoms of slopes" (13). But Johnson reveals how much beauty, tenacity and vitality there truly is in this region, her tone becoming rhapsodic as she observes "how the sphagnum springs/ and springs, how it soaks and soaks/again." (39)

Johnson's use of form and terse, workmanlike description to reflect both scientific work and the alpine tundra itself help foreground a crucial tension in this book: no matter how much we attempt to quantify, qualify, explain or analyze the natural world, there will always be something ineffable and mysterious about

it, something that escapes our grasp. In "Creek-walking," Johnson admits,

And still I don't
know where the creek begins:

a pile of stones
the pool beneath,
or a marmot
shaking the water from its coat. (18)

Though several poems highlight this divide between researchers (plus poet) and ecosystem, the most touching and surprising moments in *Field Notes from the Alpine Tundra* occur when the poems hint at our kinship with the natural world. In "Tallest Objects," for example, "Each human gesture [is] weighted with fleece and wool, / zippers and eiderdown" while "Mammals the width of a hand / gather bouquets of wildflowers in their mouths," (15). These images seem to emphasize how ill-suited humans are for this environment, especially compared to its animal inhabitants. Yet the tenderness, warmth and familiarity in both descriptions suggest a much deeper affinity between people and nature than might initially meet the eye.

At its strongest, *Field Notes from the Alpine Tundra* is crisp, quiet, and immersive, taking the reader through the "white fox of fog" (40) to experience both the wonder of seeing "two caribou appear, / antlers-first/from behind a ridge," (31) and the discomforts of roughing it, from damp underwear to blistered heels. These poems remind us, though, that just as "a landscape leaves its mark— / a scratch at the heart" (39), we make our own traces wherever we go. *Field Notes for the Alpine Tundra* asks us to consider the impact of these traces— whether they are poems, research papers or "a footprint in tundra" (39).

CLAIRE CALDWELL is a poet from Toronto, where she also edits Harlequin romances and runs poetry workshops for kids. Her first collection, *Invasive Species*, was one of the *National Post's* top five poetry books of 2014. Claire was the 2013 winner of The Malahat Review's long poem prize, and she is a graduate of the University of Guelph's MFA program.