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Finding the song the ancestors left

Small Fires by KELLY NORAH DRUKKER

McGill-Queen's UP, 2016 \$16.95

Reviewed by EMILY MCGIFFIN

Set in Ireland and France, *Small Fires*, Kelly Norah Drukker's debut poetry collection, is a petit and exquisite book of journeys. Much more than a poetic travelogue, it is a quiet homage to places and cultures that Drukker inhabits fully and allows herself to be smitten by. "No heart is safe from the sunrise at five thirty, the sky glossed and rose-petaled" (17), she writes. And, "*There is nothing in my bones that does not know these hills*" (17). Whether the poems are written in the voice of poet-as-speaker or historical characters, they are vibrant with the details of the landscapes:

Slept every night, wind-
blasted in a stone cell, as rain lashed
across

the skin door, and comets dropped
like torches
from some great hand. Men who
loved

the earth and its mists that hang, a
veil,
over prisms of sunlight they knew as
God. (11)

The book's cover depicts the Pleiades, the seven sisters star cluster named for their mother, the Greek nymph Pleione, protectress of sailing. In the myth,

the seven sisters, turned to
doves,
fall through black-winged sky,

cross oceans, islands, olive groves
while Orion trails behind them.

Always, the god comes to steal away
the innocent who carries on the
hunter's path. (33)

The image, with its celestial and mythological connotations, is apt for a book that explores ancient yet marginal cultures of an old world that "shifts by increments, and turns away" (22). The book's long opening section is set on Inis Mór, the largest of the Aran Islands with powerful ties to the ocean that are reflected in the daily life that Drukker describes. Although we understand that the poet is sojourning on the island in search of her roots, the poems carry a sense of rootedness in the Irish culture and language of the place, of changing seasons and the passage of time.

From Inis Mór, the collection shifts to "Another Winter's Child," a longer historical narrative of a woman's journey from Ireland to North America. In scenes reminiscent of James Joyce's "Evelyn," Drukker sketches a small and difficult life, the windy port and its throngs of resolute emigrants. Yet the woman in this poem is not compelled or cajoled by a man but by grievous circumstances that she successfully escapes by stepping out of the old world and into the new.

In the third section, Drukker's gaze turns from Ireland to the Occitanian villages of the Pyrenées along the Spanish border. Here, too, the poems are a series of detailed observations of places and their histories:

I walked out past the houses,

into the vineyards. Slipped in
between rows,

where roots sank into the soil –
 reaching down
where the breath of aqueducts
 lingers, breath
and the sound of sandals on soil, the
 heat
of the hands that lifted the vines
(66)

The closing section, "The Burning House," contains a tender hymn to Paul Monette, author of *Borrowed Time: An AIDS Memoir*, and his partner, Roger. Written as a dialogue, as a string of love letters to one another, the poem explores the terrain of grieving as one or both partners move inexorably towards death.

I carried you through Paris

[...]

your body floated in my arms, head
 on my chest
a skull, still your eyes smiling out of
 it (104)

Like the other poems in this collection, "The Burning House" asks questions about lineage and mortality, the ways that people live in tight connections or pass across them.

When they will leave
I cannot say

where they shall fall

how long they might stay.
(103)

Throughout the collection, Drukker speaks clearly in language transparent as wind, attuned to the beauty and pain of the world and its histories. A highly recommended read.

EMILY MCGIFFIN is a doctoral candidate in York University's Faculty of Environmental Studies where she is examining the cultural politics of South African poetry. She is the author of two poetry collections.