

7-20-2015

Subduction Zone by Emily McGiffin

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Recommended Citation / Citation recommandée

Shepherd, Kelly. "Subduction Zone by Emily McGiffin." *The Goose*, vol. 14, no. 1, article 6, 2015, <https://scholars.wlu.ca/thegoose/vol14/iss1/6>.

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The (Real) Work: A Review of Emily McGiffin's *Subduction Zone*

Subduction Zone by EMILY MCGIFFIN
Pedlar, 2014 \$20

Reviewed by KELLY SHEPHERD

The title of Emily McGiffin's second book of poems is a geological term: a subduction zone is the place where two tectonic plates collide. When one plate meets another, more massive plate, it is forced downwards beneath the earth's crust. Subduction zones result in trenches, mountains, and volcanic activity.

Upon learning this (I confess, I had to look it up), I combed through the book for metaphorical seismic activity. And you don't have to look far: geological images, from mountains and canyons to river-rocks and scree, are scattered throughout. But this is not a collection of nature poetry, by which I mean these are not meditations on beautiful scenery or natural phenomena; there are also human beings with their aqueducts and pyramids, their locomotives and roadside litter and bulldozers. There are profit margins and atrocities, red-listed species and hard questions.

In the titular poem, the narrator and Charles Darwin are waiting "at the edge of a fault," the Marianas Trench (17). They stand between winter and summer, between ocean and city, between old ways of looking at the human relationship with the natural world and new. And each of these pairs are colliding—at least, according to this reading of the poem—resulting in another subduction zone. Darwin "mentions again that species evolve" which exasperates the narrator:

[...] Chuck! What good
does that do us now? We've argued this point

already. Remember the gas flares, Terminator gene,
Dolly, the imperatives of commerce. (17)

In light of these things, *The Origin of Species* seems hardly controversial, and barely relevant. As a society—perhaps as an entire species—we have distanced ourselves from shared ancestry and interrelatedness, and opted instead for apathy, consumerism, and ecocide. This is where McGiffin's book begins.

The first section, "Postcards from the Supply Chain," gives examples of industrial society's exploitation of the environment and of other human beings. In the stunning "Nine Meditations on Edward Burtynsky," classical civilizations and architectural wonders of the ancient world parallel—via references to the Canadian photographer's works—present-day anthropocentric construction and environmental destruction.

"Cerro Rico" describes the deaths of an estimated two million Indigenous and African slaves in the silver mines that, as the end notes have it, "bankrolled the Spanish empire for three hundred years" (112):

When the mountain has eaten
all the men they can feed it, they order more
from overseas and shovel those in too. Coal

firing an empire, they descend by thousands
to die underground. (35)

The mountain in the Bolivian Andes marks the location of the subduction zone; the more massive tectonic plate (in this case, imperial Spain) quite literally rises to dominance by forcing the Other under.

"Expat" depicts the author's time working in the Philippines; two of the

tectonic plates here might simply be cultures, as the narrator struggles and delights in this new place. But it is not made clear that one “plate” is dominating the other—and here perhaps my seismic metaphor begins to fall apart—for example, in the poem “Ants,” where the narrator leaves her apartment and goes out “like a teenager / in a growth spurt, everything ill-fitting” (72) and realizes that everyone, including the local ants, will persist in their daily routines without her: as if she as a Westerner wasn’t even there. Yet there are also examples of modernization (deforestation and overfishing) that have proven detrimental to the Philippines.

The third section, “Hinterlands,” explores the intersections of wildness and domesticity in northern British Columbia. The title is reminiscent of the old National Film Board “Who’s Who” vignettes; fittingly, many of these poems feature animals in their natural (and agricultural) habitats. There are poems about camping, trapping, burning off dry grass, milking cows. Living close to the land and the seasons. There are moments of tenderness.

And yet the sense of distance persists, even here in what is probably the book’s most idyllic setting, between human and other-than-human beings. In the poem “Weight,” the narrator watches horses in a field but is unable to approach them; in

“Sleeping Out” she is awakened by a moose and made suddenly, painfully aware of the utter foreignness of her surroundings:

[...] Petrified by night,
its strangeness, inscrutable inhumane
mountains, the freshet creek and its language
no human ear can know.

[...]
It was too much to be alone with,
all this wild. (88)

“Nocturnes,” the book’s haunting final section, has spare, untitled stanzas that evoke arpeggios of rain, broken wings of moths, and the farewell songs of cranes. There are fewer mountains and stones and more feathers, more whispers. The last image you see before closing the book is the same bird that is portrayed on the front cover, but smaller—as if further away—and faded and ghostly, and almost gone.

KELLY SHEPHERD KELLY SHEPHERD has a Religious Studies MA from the University of Alberta and a Creative Writing MFA from UBC Okanagan. His fifth poetry chapbook (entitled *Fort McMurray Tricksters*) was published last year by Vancouver’s Alfred Gustav Press. Kelly is also a poetry editor for the environmental philosophy journal *The Trumpeter*.