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undercurrent by Rita Wong

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A Call for Action, a Prayer to Hold On

***undercurrent* by RITA WONG**
Nightwood Editions, 2015 \$18.95

Reviewed by **KELLY SHEPHERD**

So terribly simple, so utterly
unachieved so far:
to kick the oil addiction for love of
water

.....

to make a story large enough,
generous enough to become
better neighbours
with the winged, the finned, the four
legged, the stumbling two
leggeds
("too long a sacrifice" II. lines 3-7)

With its oral storytelling rhythms, and its balance of hope and despair, this passage is representative of Vancouver poet Rita Wong’s newest collection, *undercurrent*. In fact, Wong published two books in 2015: *undercurrent* and the graphic novel *perpetual*. Both are illustrated by Cindy Mochizuki; both seek to communicate the vital importance of water for the well-being of all biological, cultural, and spiritual life on planet Earth.

undercurrent’s cover is a green swirl of submarine life and motion, depicting an undulating spiritual ecology of human, other-than-human, and mythical beings. According to the artist’s statement at the back of the book, it is a detail of “Becoming Worthy” by Marika Swan, part of a larger collection of woodblock prints that explores the people’s “natural and supernatural relationship with whales” in Swan’s traditional Tla-o-qui-aht community.

The poems of *undercurrent* are not as stylized, or cryptic, as those of *Sybil Unrest* (co-written with Larissa Lai in 2008); this book has more in common with 2007’s *forage*. Both are collage-like, with illustrations and marginalia, and both employ a number of poetic forms. Some *undercurrent* poems, like “fresh ancient ground” (17) and “dada-thay” (70), juxtapose brief stanzas with essay-like prose; repetition and rhythm are emphasized in “immersed” (32) and “#J28” (77). Found poems utilize lines from Alberta oil sands documents (“for gregoire lake” 68) and the online *I Ching* (“threefold return” 56).

As the variety of collaborators listed in the above paragraphs attest, Wong is a poet heavily invested in community. The Acknowledgements pages include many individual names, and an extensive list of conferences, walks, schools, and gatherings. Quotations from a wide variety of literature and popular culture border the pages. The book is written in English, but phrases and names in Chinese and numerous Indigenous languages float to the surface throughout.

This emphasis on dialogue and interconnectedness—on kinship—extends beyond human cultures to include the natural world and, of course, water. In “too long a sacrifice” the coastal waters and their inhabitants, including the participants in a canoe journey, are a “murmuration of ancestors and descendants” (II. line 23); “#J28” describes round dancers and drummers raising awareness for treaty rights across the country as a “human river” (line 33). And these are not mere metaphors (pun intended). Human beings, like all living things, are composed of water and depend upon water to survive. The health of water is our health. Solidarity with all that is alive, including water itself, is the

surface tension that holds these poems together.

But Wong is not content to simply point out the ecological connections between water and life. She also condemns the rampant corporatization and consumerism that have landed us in this present era of ecocide and rising tides. Pollution and polluters are called out in the prose lines of “borrowed waters,” for example, where “the great pacific garbage patch is not just a mass of floating plastic junk the size of ontario, jostling about with jellyfish and starving squids in the ocean, but a dead albatross mirrors us back to ourselves” (lines 1-5).

The wonderfully titled “a magical dictionary from bitumen to sunlight” defines the word “bitumen” as “buried ancestors, unearthed & burned to expand the ocean” (line 18). In “lupus, a doubled being” a prophetic voice speaks for the myriad forms of life with water’s voice: “We are freshwater & saltwater, blood & bone,” a voice which becomes apocalyptic when imagining its own resilience in the face of destructive industrial capitalism: “We are wet premonition, ferocious spirit waiting for the master’s dams to crack, the inexorable and unrepentant rain, the tidal waves taller than tankers” (lines 41 and 33-34). If water’s health is also our health, then violence perpetrated against water is violence perpetrated against us. Among other things, the title *undercurrent* suggests resistance.

Indeed, despite all the oil and plastic and uranium, there is room for hope in these pages: “we persevere / through this episode called industrialization” (“the wonders of being several” lines 3-4). *undercurrent* is an ecology of joy and sadness, a complex watershed of anger and beauty. There are bright moments, like the

return of the salmon in “medicines in the city” (36) and the celebration of life’s simple pleasures in “inner compass, outer radar” (62). There is still fresh water flowing beneath the surface that can—and will—rise up.

another world is not only possible,
she is already here, carrying
on underneath our feet
reconstituting us with each new sip
of ancient water
 (“too long a sacrifice” ll. lines 9-10)

KELLY SHEPHERD’s poetry collection *Shift* was published by Thistledown Press in spring 2016. Originally from Smithers, British Columbia, he currently lives in Edmonton.