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## Tar Swan by David Martin

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**Tar Swan** by DAVID MARTIN  
NeWest, 2018 \$19.95

Reviewed by MELANIE DENNIS UNRAU

David Martin's *Tar Swan* is a narrative in four voices. The first narrator is Robert C. Fitzsimmons, Fitz for short, founder of the International Bitumen Company and the Bitumount plant in the 1920s, a key figure in the history of the development of the Athabasca tar sands even though his company seemed at many points to be a failure. Fitzsimmons the historical figure is an object of fascination, speculation, and imagination in *Tar Swan*. Fitz's voice is split or twinned, appearing as prose-poem letters to his wife Wilhelmina that reveal his more private thoughts and fears, shown at the bottom of the page, and as bombastic prose-poem speeches to the "Gentlemen" who work for him at the top of the page.

The first voice confesses,

I've never felt so naked as I do now. I  
spend most days  
shivering in shirtsleeves, vowels  
streaming from my  
mouth. (46)

And the second voice continues on the next page, "Gentlemen, we have arisen, our foes flee before us, and / our enemies scatter: Behold, the Plant is alive!" (47). Fitz's speeches echo the language and style of the sales pitch, the sermon, the quack doctor, and Fitzsimmons's 1953 pamphlet *The Truth about Alberta Tar Sands: Why Were They Kept Out of Production?*

Bitumount mechanic Frank Badura narrates verse poetry in short lines and short stanzas. Frank is recruited by Fitzsimmons from the tracking line where he first appears, tethered to other

labourers, "towing a sin of cores / against th'Athabaska" (22) — that is, hauling a scow (flat-bottomed boat) loaded with core samples of tar sand upstream along the Athabasca River. Frank is a hard worker who drinks too much and sleeps where he works, so his dreams are filled with "machines aspiring / to murder me" (68). Fitzsimmons later accuses Frank of sabotage at the Bitumount plant, an act Frank does and does not commit.

Fitzsimmons operated Bitumount in the 1930s and 40s, and both Fitz and Frank narrate from within this period, but Dr. Brian K. Wolsky is an archaeologist from the reader's time. He reports in verse couplets on his excavation of the Bitumount site and the mixed bag of prehistoric and early-twentieth-century artifacts he unearths, including a letter from Wilhelmina, Frank's glass eye, tools, arrowheads, dishes, pencils, and a tree trunk. According to the *dramatis personae* that begins the book, Wolsky "stratifies himself in a pit" (11), an action that may extend also to the poet, digging through archival documents and excavating long-buried stories and anxieties about the early days of tar sands extraction. In the "*Summary and Recommendations*" poem that ends Wolsky's narration, he writes, "Fitzy demands much of me," and warns the reader of his report (and the poetry collection?), "Don't you dare ever come here, you'll be / beholding yourself bound to yourself in the tar cage" (88). Reading *Tar Swan* while doing research on another early tar-sands innovator, I can relate to Wolsky's mounting awareness of his own complicity.

Wolsky's narration works with time in interesting ways, but the fourth character, the Swan, even more fully embodies the mixed temporality of the extraction, production, and combustion of

fossil fuels. An ambivalently Indigenous and classical figure, the Swan is a time-travelling, shape-shifting, mythological trickster who is simultaneously a prehistoric life form turned into tar (“My feathers and feces drive your cars” [15]) and an ignored contemporary of each of the other speakers. The Swan’s zombie tar-eggs break open and wreak havoc at Bitumount. Able both to contain and to take over other bodies, the Swan (the tar) controls the behaviour of the other characters and drives them insane. The Swan narrates in the centres of the pages, in Jackpine Sonnets — thirteen lines long, with lines nearly always short of ten syllables and favouring internal rhyme and alliteration over end rhyme. The Swan’s final song, however, is a culmination in content and form. It is sung from the moment of climate change and perhaps the 2016 Fort McMurray wildfire, when “last laughs are keyed from the locks” (89) and the Swan seemingly burns up. The poem’s fourteen lines and Shakespearean rhyme scheme ponder the structures of life in the tar cage, and the poem ends — “Ah, but I know skin and bones are far / from their mad embrace without my tar” (89) — with the poetic justice, if not the last laugh, of entanglement.

*Tar Swan*’s mix of lyric and innovative poetics is a challenging read. Like the stubborn and charismatic tar sands innovator he is fascinated with, Martin’s poetry is at turns charming and repulsive. He blends archaic, historical, and contemporary language and intertexts, and if you read poetry the way I do, you will need a dictionary. Martin’s blurring of fact and fiction produces what Hito Steyerl calls a productive “documentary uncertainty” about what really happened (and why we care). My uncertainty extends, too, to the

politics of suggesting that the so-called “fathers” of the tar sands (and this is indeed a masculinist and colonial history) didn’t know, or didn’t intend, or couldn’t handle the consequences of their actions. Is this just another version of denial, where we ignore the junctures at which they and we have knowingly chosen industrialization, modernization, appropriation, and ecological damage? I worry about this in my own work. I see the “reckoning” described on the back cover of *Tar Swan* as part of a larger cultural project of understanding and dismantling the “tar cage.” Martin’s troubling of the history of the tar sands in this impressive first poetry collection invites more historical and creative work in this vein.

#### WORKS CITED

- Fitzsimmons, R.C. *The Truth about Alberta Tar Sands: Why Were They Kept Out of Production?* Fitzsimmons, 1953.
- Steyerl, Hito. “Documentary Uncertainty.” 2007. *Re-Visiones*, no. 1, 2011, <http://revisiones.net/anteriores/spip.php%3Farticle37.html>.

**MELANIE DENNIS UNRAU** is a PhD candidate in English at the University of Manitoba and co-editor of *The Goose*. Her dissertation focuses on petropoetics, especially on poetry written by oil workers. She is currently writing about the poetry of S.C. Eells, another originator of the tar sands industry. Melanie is poetry editor of *Geez* magazine. She is a Sir Gordon Wu Scholar and a SSHRC Canada Graduate Scholar.