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Travelogue and Elegy in an Age of Endings

Rain Shadow by NICHOLAS BRADLEY
University of Alberta Press, 2018 \$19.95

Cloud Physics by KAREN ENNS
University of Regina Press, 2017 \$19.95

Reviewed by KELLY SHEPHERD

The titles of both *Rain Shadow* by Nicholas Bradley and *Cloud Physics* by Karen Enns refer to atmospheric phenomena; both allude to large and powerful natural forces that operate outside of human control and sometimes even (whether we like it or not) comprehension. In different ways, both books explore the human relationship with the natural world, including the land, and cycles of life. Bradley describes and appeals to massive elemental forces and beings, like earthquakes and avalanches, bears and killer whales; Enns takes a closer look at distinct places and impressions.

Both books also reflect on human frailty: Bradley on the physical injuries associated with mountain climbing and urban cycling, for example (in the poems “Mountain Failure” 55 and “Cycling” 70) and Enns on loss and vulnerability (“A Son’s Story” 23 and “Notice on the Door” 26).

In “The Same Mountain Twice,” the first section of *Rain Shadow*, the reader is guided through various western North American mountain ranges. The place-names suggest a travelogue, but these mountains are alive with mountain goats—

At three thousand
metres, hobnailed conundrums
munch (“Some Goats” 15)

—spawning salmon—

squint
to see coho flung
to sun from blue
 (“Fat Salmon in the
Clearwater River” 16)

—and human beings—“*Jobs Not Parks* bark signs / along the highway” (“Port Angeles” 18). Many of these mountain poems are arranged in tall columns on the page, with short lines in stacked stanzas, suggesting geologic layers: soaring heights or midden-like depths.

Figurative language and wordplay, often subtle, appear throughout the collection. Words morph into new words and eventually back again in “Spell for the Museum of the Canadian Rockies” (34). Repeated alliteration, such as “sending / up spume,” and “[t]ouch your tongue / to trees” in “Instructions for Travel” (47), lends music to the lines and creates an oral storytelling-like rhythm.

The poems of *Rain Shadow* are peopled with a variety of species. Some of these poems celebrate wildlife and wildness; some highlight the uneasy and destructive relationships we maintain with our fellow earthlings. There are crabs found in languages, horoscopes, and beaches (“*Cancer magister*” 68), rivers made of metaphorical mammals (“Horses off the Kitsap Shore” 83), and the pine beetles in British Columbia that “took on the landscape and won” (“In Praise of the Mountain Pine Beetle” 87). “In Midair” employs the artificial distance created by airplane travel to look at the complex of cynicism, guilt, and denial, inherent in the petrostate:

Crude gushes to the terminus,
makes
us rich. Fuck the caribou with their
concave
hooves, who'd have done the same
to us if
they'd thought of it first. (63)

The deep-time human relationship with other lifeforms, in their great multitudes and bodily diversities, is invoked in "The Beasts" (78). Elemental imagery underlines the limitations to human speech and endeavor in "First, Failure" (30) and "Failure Revisited" (31).

Cloud Physics, as the airy, abstract cover art suggests, is less visceral than *Rain Shadow* in its approach to similar subjects. As mentioned above, both collections deal with human vulnerability; Enns does so with sparse, elegiac poems. "Twelve Months," a suite of poems near the end of the book, documents a calendar-year correspondence with a recently deceased family member (47). The speculative "Epilogue," the book's longest single poem, looks back at our present age from an imagined future:

The trees on which we carved our
words
died in the years of drought.
We mourned them, scattering seeds
and prayers into the air. (10)

In this poem, remembrances of past glory ("our shining compasses," and the "stories of serenity / as we remembered it") are overshadowed by references to climate catastrophe, including the masks needed "to shield their faces from the radiance" and "[n]othing was questioned / after the last polar flares broke through" (11). Despite or perhaps because of some of the

bleak subject matter, these poems are both musical and meditative.

Some of the poems in *Cloud Physics* read like sets of instructions, suggestions for how one might live in this world, and especially how one might eventually let go: "All we can do is surrender to the bright complicity of birds" ("White Flag" 35). Both "A Son's Story" (23) and "Notice on the Door" (26) are short portraits of loss, and of how those who are gone will be remembered.

The reader is given a quiet glimpse of a nighttime neighbourhood in "People of the Suburbs, Sleep," as the speaker rides a bicycle past darkened homes, and addresses the people sleeping within:

The outlines of your dressers and
chairs will never be more
comforting.
Roll over on your other sides.
Only a thin smear of skywash flags
the city's edge. (45)

The texture and precise attention to detail that marks this collection is perhaps most evident in the urban scenery, the human geography, of "Leaving Union Station":

these bright scarves of curtains at
each open window
billowing out as the train goes by,
these scaffolds lining the sides of
endless smoking walls,
the dark pools of stairwells[.] (44)

The color and movement of these "bright scarves" is especially poignant, because of their proximity to the gloomy stillness of the "dark pools"—Enns uses imagery and juxtaposition frequently to highlight

moments of beauty and to point out their fragility.

Both of these collections address our society's balancing act as we find ourselves at the tipping point of human-altered ecology. Intellectually and intuitively, both poets explore these unwelcome frontiers. And both, in their own ways, point to the increasing necessity of letting go.

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