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Review of *Better Nature* by Fenn Stewart

Better Nature by FENN STEWART

BookThug, 2017 \$18.00

Reviewed by CLAIRE CALDWELL

As a white settler, it's hard not to get swept along by the rapturous tone in Fenn Stewart's first poetry collection, not to feel a swell of prideful recognition for the wild landscapes it describes. In the opening poem, the speaker seems to embody a majestic bird taking flight:

I loiter in bright intervals, in red,
cord-knotted wood,
in forests, torrents, tree-cathedrals

I flatter all my feathers, quite
vestigial
my crest-like armour rises shining—
I'm never dull, nor sad[.]
("if Walt Whitman were a youngish
woman..." 12-15)

As the bird rises, the reader soars with her. But Stewart does not indulge this sentiment for long. "[A]nd as I strike out 'cross the inlet," the bird-speaker says, "every goddamn mountain of my self / will gleam and wink at you" (38-39). The lyricism, the poem instructs us, is a trick.

The ease of identification with the voices in *Better Nature* also stems from their familiarity. Stewart draws primarily on Walt Whitman's diary from his journey to Canada in 1880, and pulls language from marketing emails, archival texts and Whitman's poetry. This is quite literally language we've grown up with, language that has shaped our understanding of Canada. Stewart's poems set out to unsettle

that language, to reveal the violence it both conceals and inflicts.

A recurring motif that illustrates this violence is conspicuous consumption. In one suite, Stewart weaves email marketing messages from fashion brands with those sent by environmental non-profits. The poem implores,

Connect with megafauna in YOUR
area code,
smooth over national wounds &
enter the lace race before it gets
too late[.]
("if Walt Whitman got a job writing
spam..." 64-66)

Whether selling lacy clothing or fundraising for environmental causes, these messages centre the consumer, positioning nature as a commodity and suggesting reconciliation can be obtained through an e-transfer.

Elsewhere, the Whitman-speaker boasts,

there's no beyond the lands I've
garbled up
my range's piney scope of homes

there's no beyond these pages, no
beyond these vasty coasts[.]
("if Walt Whitman, hired as a Don
Cherry replacement..." 17-19)

Whitman's selfhood expands across the continent, reflecting European settlers' sense of entitlement to North America's vast resources. In embodying the land, the speaker implicitly claims ownership of it.

Throughout the book, Stewart shifts deftly between 19th Century and contemporary personae. Each poem presents a "version" of Whitman characterized by titles that ask the reader to

imagine, for example, “if Walt Whitman, hired as a Don Cherry replacement, were asked to whip up some patriotic fervour before the big game, & took the opportunity to wax poetic re: his summer cabins” (29) or “if Walt Whitman were a graduate student working in the government publications section of Robarts Library, taking notes on a geological survey of Lake Superior” (72). The found text is not always distinct from Stewart’s words, which creates a doubling effect—the “real” Whitman, or the Whitman that represents 19th Century settler ideologies, is inextricably bound up with the “wealthy Vancouver resident bobbing about in a life raft in the suddenly much deeper Burrard Inlet” (45).

In her preface, Stewart explains, “[t]he point is not that [Whitman] failed to transcend the tenor of his time, but that contemporary Canada has likewise failed” (9). Much of the material Stewart quotes from and riffs on exists, after all, in the public record. Yet, while Indigenous people continue to face the effects of colonialism every day, many Canadians seem reluctant to even admit there’s a problem. The rhapsodic tone throughout the book underlines this willful denial, to the point that shame itself becomes an indulgence:

I embrace my shame, I cling it to
myself
Give me your rosy shame,
Say it aloud: shame, shame, shame,
shame shame—
a moist, voluptuating cry, of
sympathy or pleasure

like a great many voices crying out
all at once:
for shame, for shame—so musical,
so pleasant!
 (“if Walt Whitman indulged in some
exquisite shame...” 14-19)

The Whitman-speaker luxuriates in his shame, practically climaxing with it. It’s a ridiculous image, but it’s also chilling: when shame is reframed as euphoric, there’s no incentive for the speaker to take responsibility for his actions and no motivation to change.

By exposing how language continues to build and reinforce colonial structures in Canada, *Better Nature* seeks to tear down those structures. Of course, it’s up to Indigenous people to decide what constitutes an act of reconciliation or allyship. For settler Canadians, though, *Better Nature* is a rich, thoughtful, text that urges us to decolonize—starting with our own minds. As one speaker says, “The sweetest traitors come and leave / or else they come and stay” (“if Walt Whitman were a youngish woman...” 80-81). Now that we’re here, we must take responsibility for all we’ve done since we arrived.

CLAIRE CALDWELL is a poet and editor from Toronto, where she also runs writing workshops for kids. Her first poetry collection, *Invasive Species*, was published by Wolsak & Wynn in 2014. Claire was a 2016 writer-in-residence at the Berton House in Dawson City, Yukon. She is currently an associate editor at Annick Press.