

## BOOK REVIEWS

Louise Carson, *A Clearing*

Winnipeg: Signature Editions, 2015

96 pages, \$14.95, ISBN 9781927426630

As the vital green of summer dissolves into the yellow-orange of autumn, *A Clearing*—Louise Carson’s first full-length collection of poetry—feels like the perfect companion. The 64 poems that make up this powerful work cycle through the seasons, and while each phase is given brief moments of emphasis, it is the wet decay of autumn and the cold, glittering hardness of winter that dominate the text. “Trying to believe a spring follows this winter. / Struggling with the images / of what it might look like” (“Waiting” II.9-11), Carson’s exploration of the harsher seasons doubles as a treatise on the harshness of life. In Book I, Carson focuses on nature. In Books II and III, the human intercedes again and again, imposing itself upon the natural landscape. People “come out and take [their] marks and with [their] flesh / make the scene (“McDonald’s, 32nd Avenue, Lachine” II.23-24). With the intercession of its body, the human presence in *A Clearing* becomes a harbinger for human trauma.

In *A Clearing*, Carson juxtaposes the frozen decay of winter with the speaker’s experience of pain. Abortion, stillbirth, divorce, and the Rwandan genocide appear again and again in Carson’s text. These traumas retreat and return, as cyclical and as sure as the seasons. Throughout *A Clearing*, Carson details the poet’s attempt to grapple with these traumas, as she “imagin[es] the flower” (“Waiting” I.12) that will announce the passing away of winter and the joyous return of spring. The poems collected in *A Clearing* embrace that joy as readily as they acknowledge the pain that precedes it. In “Twice,” Carson’s speaker sees a fox in winter while cross-country skiing with her husband. One becomes aware, as the poem proceeds, that the marriage ended abruptly, flash-frozen as if by a winter storm: “We paused / [the fox] trotted on” (II.10-11). The speaker sees the same animal the winter after her divorce, and this time it is the fox that stops: “It paused. Was joy.

/ Was joy returned” (II.22-23). Here, the fox, like other totems of nature peppered throughout *A Clearing*, is a reminder that while pain may surge and resurge, joy too is cyclical—a revitalizing force infinitely renewed by the majesty of nature. In *A Clearing*, one’s link to nature defies what seems “the pure impossibility / of future bliss” (“First Christmas, after” II.4-5), interceding to “offer companionship where none was conceived” (“The turtle” II.10-11). This experience of nature and—perhaps more importantly—the act of expressing it in poetry provides hope, creating a “clearing” in the pain that permeates existence.

The first line of Carson’s collection—“What can I do with words / that lie unnoticed / on the page” (“In a visual world” II.1-3)—issues a challenge, and everything that follows attempts to answer it, investigating the relationship between trauma, recovery, and the written word. Carson’s words “lie on the page,” but they also “hang in the air” (II.14-15). Like the seasons and memories that eternally return, Carson’s words—her expression of these experiences—return also, falling from the air and landing where we can “go and look down on them” (I.10), a constant reminder of the tenacity of the human spirit.

As we pass again into winter, the poems of *A Clearing* remind us that spring always comes again. The “green [will] poke up / through rough earth [and] dead leaves” (“Waiting” II.5-6). The frost will melt away, and the soft, wet earth—soft like our fragile bodies, our delicate hearts—will surprise us with its ability to regenerate.

—Cheryl Hann, Dalhousie University

Jeff Steudel, *Foreign Park*  
 Vancouver: Anvil Press, 2015  
 90 pages, \$18, ISBN 9781772140156

In a poem entitled “Postcard,” Jeff Steudel concludes that “Canada / is everywhere. The Fraser, the Nile, and the Gomati” (51). The title of the poem cuts against these final sentiments with understated irony—what good is a postcard if everywhere one goes is home? In an age when Evian water bottles and “cans of pure Icelandic mountain air / for sale” (53) circulate the globe, however, Steudel’s remarks nevertheless ring true, not least because, as he warns us, polluted air and poisoned waters heed no national borders.

As much today as ever before, we are in need of poets who take as their vocation the task of rendering the foreign familiar and the familiar foreign.

Appropriately, then, this Vancouver-based writer's first collection of poetry is entitled *Foreign Park*. But if Steudel's *Foreign Park* is an apt metaphor for the poetic and readerly processes of discovery and rediscovery, it is also yet another name for Canada, a place that Steudel seems eager both to claim as his homeland and to problematize as a civilized fiction that can alienate Canadians from their roots in nature. This quandary will not be unfamiliar to readers of Canadian literature, but Steudel navigates the terrain with confidence and even manages, with well-chosen words, to mitigate a few modern anxieties.

Indeed, Steudel's poems offer themselves as proofs that nature and culture need not—and should not—be conceived in opposition to each other. Instead, reality and artifice are presented as inextricably twined, for better or for worse. Thus an eagle with “ink-tipped talons” (35) soars through his pages, while “[a]n albatross feeds / on plastic pellets in plankton” (43) and “[a] collective lung / of crows” (55) caws from overhead. At his best, Steudel writes with a gentle and commendable subtlety, so that symbolic associations shift through his poems like shadow and light through the branches of a tree. His images are, at times, tantalizingly metaphoric and, at others, straightforwardly realistic, but it is not always obvious which are which. Consider the following example: “I park the car at the river's edge,” one speaker tells us. “You say, Nature / could take it all back. I say, Your eyes are prairie” (14). Parking the car at the river nicely sets the scene for a philosophical debate on the merits and detriments of human civilization and its attendant exploitation of natural resources. Of course, juxtapositions such as these are far from apolitical, but Steudel's poetic eye and ear guide him safely through the treacherous climes of both philosophy and politics. Mercifully, he seems disinterested in didacticism. Instead of pounding the proverbial pulpit, he speaks softly, not so that we will miss his voice, but so that we will listen all the more carefully.

Steudel reminds us, in our age of incendiary rhetoric and information overload, that metaphors need to be taken seriously, if not literally. To this end, certain of his poems are tinged with a shade of melancholy hope or hopeful melancholy, which evokes the bitter sweetness of both nostalgia and prescience. Take, for example, “Hornby Island Vacation,” in which Steudel describes “The bee's golden parcels: / drop-off, pickup; / the wasp's tenacity / around the peach pie— / and me, knowing I will soon / leave this small economy / when September comes, / top-heavy and buzzing, / to get back to work” (17). Or consider the moving “I Still Picture Us Like That,” in which he writes, “The past is how I think about it now, even though / we didn't talk

about the future then... Of course / I am living in the past and the future, even if I'm wrong. / At the moment I don't need to know everything" (61). Contemplating these lines, one breathes a sigh of relief not only because Steudel sidesteps the moralizing tone of too much contemporary poetry with grace, but also because that grace allows his reader a much-needed moment of rest and reprieve.

I write this review in Lethbridge, Alberta, which, according to Google Maps, is only 119 kilometres away from Waterton Lakes, the nearest national park. Practically speaking, this knowledge helps me to locate myself. And yet Steudel's poetry has inclined me to wonder whether I can really know where I am, or indeed who I am, because I can identify myself vis-à-vis the nearest national park. No doubt this is a peculiarly Canadian anxiety. And yet Steudel's poetry transcends that anxiety in a way that I believe is profoundly useful in our modern world, albeit not in the pragmatic sense of helping to purge glaciers of toxins or to stall climate change. Paradoxically, in other words, although his poetry will take you there, *Foreign Park* isn't a place you can go. It's a state of awareness. Steudel calls us to witness the world that is both within and beyond us, to really pay attention. "Indecision has knocked loose my will" (42), he worries, and yet his conviction does not falter. "The river rived the land," he recalls in "Air Conditioner." "Again the magic of water / rose up and up to be counted on. To be / counted on? River it to me. Press on. / Please press on" (87).

—Liam Monaghan

Kris Bertin, *Bad Things Happen*

Windsor: Biblioasis, 2016

224 pages, \$19.99, ISBN 9781771960540

Kris Bertin shouldn't give up his night job. And not because he isn't a talented writer. *Bad Things Happen* is one of the strongest debut collections of stories I have read. His work as a bartender and bouncer (and before that a mover, a general labourer, an assistant art gallery curator, a call-centre rep, and a cook) has given him the ability to write about a cross-section of society in a way that few writers can.

Bertin's characters rise up from the pages of *Bad Things Happen* like it's a sort of Maritime gothic. Sometimes macabre, occasionally frightening, and then at times surprisingly tender, Bertin creates such psychological tension that you want to look away, but you feel compelled to keep on reading.

Some of these figures are ghostly (the beautiful, drug-addled Morgan, a “soft nothing,” or Mrs. Tremblay, the reclusive apartment block owner “draped in white blankets like a bride,” who speaks directly into the mind of the narrator), but most of them are people we recognize, like garbage collectors, professors, criminals, and bank tellers. Bertin performs a sort of literary vivisection on them all.

Transformation is what many of Bertin’s characters are after. Some are stuck. The teenaged speaker in the eponymous story that opens the collection has contempt for the waitresses who work at her town’s gas stop hang-out. But by the end you get the sense that, unlike her friend Tan who has walked down the highway into oblivion, she will join the “ring of girls smoking in their green uniforms.”

The night custodian suffering from alcohol-related dementia (“Is Alive and Can Move”) is another figure who seems stalled at the end of his story, in which the walls of the building he cleans come alive like a sort of proletarian version of Gilman’s “The Yellow Wallpaper.”

“Make Your Move,” probably the most experimental of the collection, offers four different versions of how the story could go. But in each one, the narrator, a fighter-turned-limousine driver, is as lonely and isolated as in the others.

Yet some of these characters find salvation. In many stories, Bertin offers an apotheosis of the gritty. In “Girl on Fire Escape,” a window washer becomes the disciple of a cam-girl Jesus who has sold all of Sensualcams.com’s client information, emptied its bank accounts, and taken up stealing vending machines instead: “She extended her arms, extended them to the people working and the people drinking and said this is it. Do it or don’t.”

“Crater Arms” gives us Rick, a young man whose parents have both died. Abandoning his middle-class home to live in a rat-infested rooming house, the “Crater Arms” roughly cradles Rick, holds his emptiness, and becomes a sort of sanctuary for him. Rick finds solace in the apartment of his born-again landlady (discussing religion, despite the fact that “she will sleep with me if I go there. That’s all I have to do, just show up”) and in his friendship with a fatherless boy who helps him trap rats. Even the dead rats seem to offer a benediction of sorts: “One of his little pink hands is curled into a ball, the other has a couple of little fingers raised.”

Although these stories aren’t linked, they are preoccupied with the same questions, and sometimes characters seem to re-appear (two Tans, two Chrises, a Rick and a Richard, and two Champs) but are not clearly recognizable as the same person we met in a previous story. Chris #1, the window

washer-turned-thief, for example, becomes Chris the animal killer in “Your #1 Killer,” his gift for extermination God-like (“There appears to be no blood whatsoever, like he was able to somehow stop their hearts from beating”).

Aside from the notions of transformation and salvation, a common question running through these stories is what constitutes “civility” and what it means to be “feral.” In “The Narrow Passage,” the most gripping of the stories, Bertin follows two garbage collectors on their rounds, which run from suburban cul-de-sacs in which home owners occasionally leave upbeat notes taped to their cans, to “the third leg,” a terrifying string of properties in the woods where demented inhabitants leave them bizarre offerings in a sort of trash temple.

And yet, Dr. Benjamin Chesterfield and his academic ex-wife in “The Story Here” offer us another version of what it means to be wild. Their total sexual self-indulgence, such that it takes the construction of a chart for their adult children to keep track of all of their alliances, makes the reader wonder if their messed up, unhappy offspring are really much different than the abandoned children at the end of “The Narrow Passage,” their five bowls of cereal in front of them, pale faces “flickering blue from the light of the television.”

Mostly, we see both forces at work in a single character, such as the hit man in “The Eviction Process,” who is described as a “human pitbull,” but who has tender affection for an autistic boy named J. J.

All of these characters seemed poised on a precipice, like Richard the garbage collector who feels “split in three, between the person he was, the one he claimed to be, and the one he wanted to become.”

Kris Bertin seems poised on the precipice of something big. Good things happen.

—Meghan Nieman, Dalhousie University

Amitav Ghosh, *The Great Derangement*

Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016

176 pages, \$22.00, ISBN 9780226323039

Amitav Ghosh’s *The Great Derangement* deals with different aspects of the current climate change crisis. The book is divided into three parts, which are titled “Stories,” “History,” and “Politics.” The first and longest part deals with narratives of climate change, which include real descriptions, predictions, as well as an engaging discussion of the limitations of some of the

standard narrative styles used to address the theme of climate change. The second part contextualizes the phenomenon of climate change by showing the emergence of a specific kind of industrial capitalism over the last few centuries, which resulted in unequal access to natural resources in different parts of the world and the present crisis. In the third part, Ghosh describes the political formations around climate change and shows how a different conception of nature is essential for addressing the problem.

Ghosh starts by making us wonder if there exists a clear separation between human beings and non-human nature, an assumption that underlies most discussions of nature. Another assumption that he takes on is the relative prominence given in narratives—fictional and otherwise—to gradual change as opposed to extreme and improbable events. He does this by describing a tornado he personally witnessed in Delhi in 1978, which looked like a “grey, tube-like extrusion forming on the underside of a dark cloud” (16). The strong impression created on the author’s inner world by this extreme climatic event is effective to the point that it strangely communicates the idea that nature chose him to tell this story about climate change and non-human nature.

At the root of the problem, in Ghosh’s view, is a specific mode of looking at domains internal and external to the observer’s mind. It has a history that goes back to the nineteenth century, when a few western European nations became extremely industrialized and rich. Narratives of gradual change and the inner/outer dichotomy found expression in the rising literary form of the novel, whereas on the “nature” side it manifested itself as attempts to discover law-like regularities in descriptions of nature.

Ghosh shows that an unfortunate consequence of the modern distinction between the human and the non-human is the failure to accept that most objects are “hybrids.” Ghosh himself is a writer who tries to break down the distinction between fictional and scientific accounts, as seen in his 2004 novel *The Hungry Tide*, which effectively weaves the socio-political and biological aspects of the animals (including human beings) and plants in the richly biodiverse Sundarbans area of Bengal. The people of the area recognize this intuitively: the local legend of the powerful Dokkhin Rai brings the man-eating tiger of the Sundarbans into the socio-cultural narrative.

The east coast of India, where the Sundarbans is located, is thought to be environmentally more delicate than the west coast. In an attempt to examine whether the latter coast is indeed safe from all such extreme events, Ghosh does a historical survey, which shows that extreme climatic events

are not improbable in the prominent west coast city of Mumbai. His warnings about the possible impact of such events on South Mumbai, a highly populated area by the sea with a large number of constructions, should alert citizens and policy makers to the gravity of the situation.

While discussing the history of climate change, Ghosh argues that the discovery and use of coal in China 1000 years ago and the discovery and use of petroleum in Burma about a century and a half ago disrupt the prevalent notion of the exceptionality of western modernity. He discusses the case of India as an example and indicates that if the colonial regime had not deliberately restricted the growth of coal-based technology in the nineteenth century (due to competition and monopoly), one might imagine a different rate and direction of technological progress in India, which would no longer be described as “inferior” or “undeveloped.” Ghosh points out an interesting, almost ironic, unintended, and certainly positive consequence: the fact that Britain did not allow coal-based technology to develop in India may have inadvertently slowed down the threat to the climate caused by industrial development.

These historical forces have almost taken the world to a point where it is becoming obvious that the poor of the “global south” will be forced to suffer most the consequences of climate change, which will result in the rise of environmental refugees. As the unequal availability of natural resources is at the root of the problem, this has the potential to create political alliances that could be considered as threats by the nations who do not want to give up their privileged positions, which are intimately connected to the consumption of fossil fuels.

Ghosh also notes that contemporary political activism has a diminishing effect on the governing systems controlled by networks of corporate and state institutions. The apparent failure of politics in the twenty-first century, as was evident from the anti-war movement of 2003, makes Ghosh consider the idea that alternative ways of seeing and representing the problem might in themselves be part of the solution. As part of that attempt, he examines Pope Francis’ encyclical *Laudato si’* and the Paris Agreement that resulted from the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change. Ghosh is clearly impressed by the simple and direct engagement with the question of justice for all human beings in the pope’s document as opposed to the strategic framing and opacity of the Paris Agreement. This is not surprising, since he has been advocating a position rooted in a tighter bond between the human and the non-human as well as an increased attention to questions of justice and equity that go hand-in-hand with the attempts to solve ecological prob-

lems. Ghosh's challenge to the way of looking at nature as distinct from the human, which is connected to certain interpretations of a rationalist-empiricist tradition, is charming as well as instructive. However, the idea of the sacredness of nature associated with several eastern religions and Catholic mystics like St. Francis of Assisi has a politics that can be manipulated by regressive forces. That is probably the only thing one needs to be wary of while being enthusiastic about Ghosh's new book.

—Jobin M. Kanjirakkat, University of King's College