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Second Growth by Fabienne Calvert Filteau

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Second Growth by Fabienne Calvert Filteau
Creekstone Press, 2014 \$18

Review written by **JOSEPHINE MASSARELLA**

Fabienne Calvert Filteau is a young poet living in Hazelton, British Columbia, on Gitksan territory. Born to a multigenerational central British Columbia family, Filteau grew up in Ottawa, Ontario. She completed a creative writing at the University of Victoria in 2011 and, for almost a decade, she planted trees in the interior of British Columbia along the Chilcotin plateau, in Smithers, Hazelton, and Fort Nelson. *Second Growth* is her first collection of poetry.

Second Growth is about trauma and regeneration. Expressed through the devastation of old growth forests, Filteau deftly interweaves disparate concepts into a seamless tapestry. Imbued with the spirit of transformation, *Second Growth* also evokes hope and reconnection. Prologue excepted, the book begins and ends with a maternal figure by the water: "My mother and I dip like needles into the water / as if too much movement might disturb the sky" (11). Graceful and delicate, the imagery in "Mackerel Sky," the first poem, denotes the author's close connection to her mother, a key relationship in the book:

I'm beginning to fear that I can't keep
the part of me that is my mother
hidden. . . .
.....
Our bodies echo
across the lake tonight, the
dissonance of loons /
who caterwaul a strange harmony
of blood and time and other things
that can't be spoken between them.
(11)

The theme of devastation appears throughout *Second Growth*: "All day clouds moan above clearcut hills, the air wrung / to a dark tight brain" (14). In "Beetle Kill", the horror of the mountain pine beetle and its ensuing devastation is exacerbated by a changing climate, as warmer winters enable beetles to reproduce unhindered. The beetle "introduces" (18) a blue stain fungus into the bark, which, over a short period of time, kills the tree. Spreading rapidly, it decimates entire forests:

Now winters sludge along, the beetle
eats its heart out, and snap
goes the timber
of weak blue wood.

From this hill where I stand, the red
forest, a dead sea
One province's hellfire. Glaring eternal
sunset. (18).

Apocalyptic images of clearcut abound. Logging debris litters the landscape, as rust from the "Blistered gears of the buncher" (58) crumbles: "Eczema of the steel age, grief / colonizing skin. Corpse-rinds of larch dried" (58). Erstwhile verdant forest mutates into "bald alien plain" (57), and Labrador tea becomes "windborne, a dust cloud tumbling over upturned / brush, the hair on the back of the clearcut bristling" (41). Only the haunting barrenness remains: "In these clearcuts nothing moves / but the wind, and wind blowing from anything" (20). Eerie and desolate, "Wildlife tree patch creaks / like shifting bones" (27).

Filteau's poetry is lucid and politically charged. Not coincidentally, the poem "Clearcut A55901-1" is also the name of a renowned court case between the Tsilhqot'in Nation and British Columbia. In

this poem, she examines historical injustices from a postcolonial perspective: “From schoolbook English I have eaten histories /of peaceful settlement, simple savages” (31).

Filteau mourns the loss of wild spaces. Grizzly bears, once abundant in British Columbia, become scarcer every year, as humans increasingly impinge upon their habitats. Extensive logging damages the soil, altering its composition, and creating deep ruts, or skidder trails. In “Grizzly on the Logging Road,” Filteau pays homage to Governor General Award winner Earle Birney, incorporating a few lines from “The Bear on the Delhi Road” into her own poem, distinguishing his verse from hers with italics. “Grizzly on the Logging Road” presents an unusual chance meeting on a logging road:

And the bear,
a slough-eyed Buddha
a street-drunk sage
looks down at the empty road
the cluster of skinny-limbed ants
calling up.

It is strange, this encounter:
the still bear
the humans
slowing in their dance.

The scarified earth
is a topography of skidder trails
where wild is one last freckle
on the continent's whitewashed brow.
(57)

Despite the grim depictions in *Second Growth*, Filteau offers hope. In the wake of mass devastation, subtle changes in the landscape appear, hinting at regeneration and the promise of wild

blooms:

The clearcut is a ragged
meadow. Wildflowers
lanky and thin-soil lean

.....

After devastation, the height of pine
forest
shaken down, tugged out by the toenails
until a shroud of dry needles remains, arnica
is first to break the skidder trail's crust
and spread its poultice across the earth.
(16)

The last poem, “The River,” begins and ends by the water's edge. It broaches a traumatic event in her mother's life, and, by extension, on the poet and her family. There are eight references to the word “mother,” and three to “mom” in this poem. “The River” is challenging to read, and, as, I imagine, it would have been to write. The first two pages feature the author as a child at a sunny river site “while the neighbour drank beer / shot squirrels to bits” (81). The word sun appears twice on the first page: “sun splitting open the sky” (80), and “crisp and heavy as that summer sun” (80), as though it were shining light on a dark and often avoided subject.

I caught my first fish
at seven years old
in the river where our mother
would try to die. (80)

A fresh voice, Fabienne Calvert Filteau's candour astonishes. At times visceral, you feel the surfaces of the textures she describes, magnifying them so you can touch them. In *Second Growth*, Filteau takes you on a wild ride, the current so swift and deep that there is no turning back. Weathering the wilderness, you

emerge. Altered, yet nevertheless intact.

JOSEPHINE MASSARELLA is an independent filmmaker based in Hamilton, Ontario. Her award winning films have screened at festivals world-wide. She graduated from Athabasca University's Master of Arts in Integrated Studies, specialization in Cultural Studies. She has an undergraduate degree in film from UBC, and a graduate certificate in Advanced Film and Television from Sheridan. Josephine also teaches cinema studies and introductory screenwriting.

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