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***Anthropocene Blues* by JOHN LANE**

Mercer UP, 2017. \$17.00 USD

Reviewed by **JESSICA CORY**

Anthropocene Blues is yet another insightful and thought-provoking poetry collection from South Carolina environmental writer John Lane. Reading this collection is akin to trekking the woods or exploring the seaside with a brilliant geologist and naturalist. Lane's speakers mourn the losses of the Anthropocene while struggling to find a way through the guilt of being complicit in these losses. Thankfully for the reader's wellbeing, one way this guilt is processed is through finding stillness and intricate moments of beauty in the now-manmade world in which they find themselves.

Lane's use of very specific terminology, such as "Bull's Point's Puffins" (58), "kittiwake colony" (58) and "minke pods" (7), showcase his familiarity with a variety of environments and the non-human beings that inhabit them. However, this is not simply a poetry collection of bucolic nature writing, because, well, it's John Lane, who, for the uninitiated, is a poet who seemingly takes pleasure in complicating his readers' views of the natural world. Beer pong makes an appearance as do an imaginary colonial ship "named *You're Screwed*" and "pleistocene draft cards" (13). Lane's skillful blending of intricate nature-based imagery with contemporary twenty-first century references allows for the creation of highly engaging poems that also encourage the reader to think deeply and critically about the themes being discussed.

Many of the poems in *Anthropocene Blues*, particularly those with titles beginning with "Field Notebook," transport the reader to exact moments and settings and are written in chunks of eloquent prose

rather than in traditional stanzas. These particular poems also include historical vignettes, for example, Aldo Leopold's death in "Field Notebook: Burning" (30). The 1867 Wagon Box Fight that occurred in Fort Phil Kearny, Wyoming makes an appearance in "Field Notebook: Antelope Among Cattle" (38). By exploring these connections between humans, history, and natural world, the reader is met with the idea that the Anthropocene is not a change that occurred overnight, or even in the past century; it has been hundreds of years in the making.

Several more poems in the collection have titles that begin with "The Geologist" and follow the speaker's insights on a variety of environmental quandaries, such as "The Geologist Anticipates the End of Time" (22), "The Geologist Laments Limestone" (28), and "The Geologist Scrutinizes Dinosaurs in the Anthropocene" (24). Creating a single speaker to span a group of poems allows for an amount of character development that is not often found in collections of poetry, and this development heightens the sense of connection and shared humanity between reader and speaker.

Another theme that runs through *Anthropocene Blues* is erosion, with six poems sharing that single word as their title. These poems also all end in colons, suggesting a continuity, a sort of endless erosion that cannot be contained. In the fourth "Erosion," the speaker theorizes that, "maybe the Anthropocene demanded the colon: the chemistry of rot / equal parts building up and tearing down, a balanced equation" (32). This follows an earlier nod to our current state of perpetual erosion in the first "Erosion": "The present erodes, each online search, or was there ever / a present to start with?" (11). These ideas call

into question not only our collective realities, but also how we view the cycles that surround us in co-creating those realities. While such ideas may seem esoteric or abstract, these poems call on readers to reflect deeply and try to figure out what is occurring in the natural world and what part we play in such occurrences.

From this call to introspection (and extrospection), the speaker then leads readers deeper into this conversation by posing the following problem:

why search unless something
is really lost, and what is, that is the
question, begs all
those useless trivia answers,
conundrums, cacophonies
information feeding our brains, fogging
the windshield
of what matters. (11)

This idea that we're "fogging" up our brains with technological advances and failing to truly engage with the world around us is not new: environmental writers have carried on this theme for centuries. However, what Lane accomplishes, not only in this particular poem but also through the collection, is a sense that while, yes, the world is changing and evolving in many problematic ways, all hope is not lost.

The hope and humour, unexpected in a collection that grapples with such demoralizing topics as extinction and environmental destruction, work with rather than against these themes to keep the reader engaged. Whether a speaker is accidentally pricked by stinging nettle, despite spotting it beforehand in "Nettle" (57), or feeling rejuvenated after a camping trip in "Cirque of the Towers" (36), Lane seems to want readers to remember that "the past is a funhouse mirror and the future is black magic" (59).

JESSICA CORY teaches in the English Department at Western Carolina University. She is the editor of *Mountains Piled upon Mountains: Appalachian Nature Writing in the Anthropocene*, forthcoming with WVU Press in August 2019.