

GOTHIC NATURE



GOTHIC NATURE II

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BOOK REVIEWS: FICTION

Gary Budden and Marian Womack (eds.),
An Invite to Eternity: Tales of Nature Disrupted
(Madrid: Calque Press, 2019)

Michael Wheatley

An Invite to Eternity: Tales of Nature Disrupted (2019) begins with a plea: ‘we need, more than ever, stories that recover the future we have lost for ourselves by imagining it, filling it with plausible solutions’ (p. 19). The hyperobject of climate change, an issue so all-encompassing that it exceeds human comprehension, has been unfortunately exacerbated by the alienating effects of scientific analyses. As co-editors Gary Budden and Marian Womack stress, ‘communicating climate change, the *idea* of climate change, is no longer simply a question of transmitting data’ (p. 16). Instead, they suggest the value of fiction in translating this abstract issue. They favour the speculative mode, arguing that within a suspension of disbelief lies a personal vulnerability to absorbing ‘the realities of climate change’ (p. 17). From the implicit to the explicit, the everyday to the apocalyptic, the eighteen tales collected thus each engage with Anthropocene-related crisis and uncertainty.

Meticulously structured, the collection shifts from an initial realist approach to increasingly outré experimentation. Naomi Booth’s ‘WARNING: Localised Quicksand’ proves the perfect introduction, telling an evocative tale as much concerning the trauma of fractured relationships as the inability to understand one’s position in an increasingly unstable world. Claire Dean’s ‘Lichen Storey’ and Tiina Raevaara’s ‘The Birds Always Return’ then develop and usurp this realism, shifting familiar environments into grotesque landscapes where the air becomes toxic and the sea levels rise.

Eased into the collection, the tales then adopt an increasingly fantastic approach. Although perhaps imbibing too heavily from the well of horror writing clichés, D.P. Watt’s ‘We are the Clay’ echoes H.P. Lovecraft in its catastrophic tale of a collapsing coastal community. Meanwhile,

Aliya Whiteley's 'Star in the Spire' imagines a world where 'all that once shrank back and was buried, [rises] up anew,' with strange new lifeforms emerging from the ground, while Kristen Roupenian's 'The Rainbow' concerns a curious cruise ship which seems to cycle through staff, expressing a paranoia of identity alongside its peripheral engagement with the harmful impacts of tourism (p. 150).

One of my personal favourites of this style, 'My Uncle Eff' by Malcolm Devlin masterfully explores the divide between the rural and urban, hyperobjects, and the notion that landscapes are entwined with their stories. The narrative centres around the suggestion that on the right night, at the cliffs of Hunstanton, one can ascend above the clouds and see 'the corpse of Britain, lain out there as though she'd just been murdered' (p. 78). Deftly combining folk horror, nature writing and weird fiction, Devlin's work proves an early highlight of the anthology.

An Invite to Eternity is then further buoyed by the inclusion of international authors, broadening its scope and challenging the often-Eurocentric conception of climate crisis. These stories demonstrate not only how different cultures evoke the issue, but the global impact of pollution and changing weather patterns. Usman T. Malik's haunting 'Laal Andhi' takes place in Pakistan, reflecting on terrorism as a crimson storm descends following innocent death; 'The Parasite' by Anna Starobinets is a gruesome take on the limits of human evolution which also critiques Russian Orthodoxy; and a second standout, Vida Cruz's 'In the Shadow of the Typhoon, Humans and Mahiwaga Cooperate for Survival', draws upon the author's own journalistic background in order to construct a magical realist report of the aftermath of Typhoon Yolonda.

The likes of 'Body' by Alberto Chimal and Regina Kanyu Wang's 'The Story of Dǎo' similarly expand the collection's diversity of narrative perspectives. The former evokes Jeff VanderMeer in its queer tale of human/nonhuman hybridity, while the latter adopts a uniquely techno-ecological slant. Timothy J. Jarvis's 'Brother Burgholt's Charm' then adds its own humorous personality to the mix, continuing the anthology's excellent shifting of tones and approaches.

Yet, some of the most stirring pieces are those which eschew the paraphernalia of the speculative almost entirely. Gareth E. Rees's 'Tyrannosaurs Bask in the Warmth of the Asteroid' concerns a father, scared for his daughter's future, as they visit a local zoo. A fire starts to spread from the adjoining fields, with the patrons seemingly paying no attention. Critiquing our own capacity to sleepwalk towards disaster, Rees's work demonstrates that the horror of climate crisis can be intimate and insidious.

Unfortunately, there are a few stories which fail to fully resonate. 'Snow, Wind and Diesel' by Kathleen Rani Hagen struggles to justify its length, with little narrative movement beyond its narrator's ruminations on their Arctic environment. Additionally, Camilla Grudova's 'Jackfruit' intrigues with its reflections on waste culture, though proves somewhat unfocused, while Alexandra Manglis's 'What Planets Are These, Conjured from the Depths of our Imagination?' closes the collection on a slightly anticlimactic note, constructing a curious narrative about a planet undergoing rapid shifts in climate that ultimately feels rushed.

It would also be remiss to overlook the overall production quality of the collection. Typographical errors abound, ranging from the harmless—'sea does that sort of things to a person'; 'to the east the it gives way'—to an unfortunate instance where a character swaps sex mid-sentence (pp. 55, 74). None of these lapses spoil the collection, but they do frequently distract.

In her introduction, Womack highlights that 'all the stories are 'tainted'—or perhaps 'covered' is a better word—with a sense of hope' (p. 19). Standing in contrast to this statement, one or two do demonstrate strains of anti-humanist thought. 'The Apprentice' by Sofía Rhei is a comedic fable where animal species petition the Pied Piper to kill the human race. Yet, with its language of humanity as 'an infestation. A blight' (p. 156), the tale ultimately sits rather uncomfortably.

By embracing the speculative in its broadest sense, both Budden and Womack have opened the door to a diverse range of approaches and writing styles which sing in harmony with one another. Rather than falling into the frequent trap of anthologies in which repetition sets in and stories stagnate, these tales continue to find fresh and innovative angles throughout. Budden

concludes his own introduction by stating that ‘we have been handed our invite to eternity, it’s not too late to hand it back’ (p. 23). Knowing that authors such as these are leading the conversation, *An Invite to Eternity* does indeed provide room for optimism.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Budden, G. and Womack, M. (eds.) (2019) *An Invite to Eternity: Tales of Nature Disrupted*.
Madrid, Calque Press.