

## Nilsen, "Otolith"

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## Book Review

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Nilsen, Emily. *Otolith*. Goose Lane Editions, 2017.

*Otolith* is Nelson, British Columbia writer Emily Nilsen's first book of poems. Among other things, it is a book about people who live and work on the water. It is a book of poems about maps, and fog, and human beings and the ocean dissolving into one another.

"Otolith—the ear stone—is a series of bones that helps us to orient ourselves in space," according to the back cover. For both aquatic and terrestrial vertebrates, otoliths serve as indicators of balance, direction, linear motion, and even sound detection. The ear stone grows as a fish grows, accumulating layers like the rings of a tree, and so an otolith is used to determine a fish's age. Furthermore, it contains information about diet and where the fish has been. The poem "Otolith" (the second one) describes this process: "In labs under microscopes, scalpels splice fish skulls" revealing "mini-museums of aquatic travel," and more specifically, "time and space deposited by nutrients" (Nilsen 2017, 85). Nilsen's poetry accumulates layers by returning again and again to these themes of sensory perception, stillness and motion, and aging. The cover photograph of a well-used outboard motor reflects both the setting and the subject matter of these poems (i.e., British Columbia's West Coast and the human and other beings who make it their home) and, suspended out of context on the front cover like a biological specimen, the motor could be the ear stone of a boat.

For the fishermen and marine researchers who populate the poems of *Otolith*, the sea is a place of living and livelihood—a place where human and water bodies become one, or seem to—but it is also a place of loneliness and loss. Fragile moments and ecosystems are sketched like remote islands in the book's "Intertidal" section, such as the "Fragile Morning of the Landlady" whose terrycloth robe is "belted to keep / her heart in" (Nilsen 2017, 43); the woman who milks cows in "Fragile Morning of the Farmhand Who Longs to Leave" watches a fishing boat stirring the sea into "milk froth" (Nilsen 2017, 45). Other portraits include a man in his trawler, and a solitary hitch-hiker; like the many versions and behaviours of the fog, people are observed as extensions of this damp and watery landscape.

The sea also represents aging, as in the poems about the narrator's grandfather. For example, in "Meanwhile, I Take a Glass of Scotch to Bed": "We pad him in a life vest, draw straws / to decide who will push, then look the other way // as he heads out to the bouncing sea" (Nilsen 2017, 31). This surreal relationship of the ocean to this family, and particularly the aging grandfather, appears in several poems, including "Meanwhile, in His Dreams," where the grandfather swims "through the arteries / of a blue whale" (Nilsen 2017, 34), and "Meanwhile," in which the saline droplets in the hospitalized grandfather's intravenous tube return his body to the ocean: "so happily estuarine, no longer landlocked" (Nilsen 2017, 73).

With repeating images, lines, and even repeating titles (such as “Pre-Dawn Walk” and “An Address to Dusk”), Nilsen shows the repetition inherent in coastal weather, the endless motion of boats tied to docks, and labour like tree-planting (as in the poem-sequence “Screef”). The book is divided into five sections: “Fog,” “Meanwhile,” “Intertidal,” “Meanwhile,” and “Fog,” a palindrome made up of receding tide-like repetitions that suggest the passage of time and the bewildering nature of coastal weather—especially the fog. The fog brings with it the fragrances of flowers on some occasions and of wet mammoths on others. The fog seems to have agency, intelligence, and motives; along with the people in Nilsen’s poems who live and work on the sea and in the bush, it is another character. The short poem “Float House” (Nilsen 2017, 19) is not about the fog, but it exemplifies Nilsen’s eye for detail and interconnectedness:

Night mice. Their nibbling a distraction  
from sleeplessness. If mice live on average  
  
two years, these are 48th generation,  
a moving insulation keeping the building  
  
upright. Great- and great-great-grandparents  
are nocturnal. My eyelids both open and closed,  
  
it’s that dark. Latin for *little mouse* also means  
*muscle*. Another translation for *musculus*  
  
is *muschel*. A mischief of mice, their eyes,  
all pupil, wink like wetted shells.

*Have you seen the ghost?* Billy asks.

But fog is the most commonly recurring image in these poems: ten poems share the same questioning title “And What of the Fog?” which creates a sense of building urgency and mystery. Fog drifts and reappears throughout the poems, concealing some things and revealing

others; the extensive white space on the pages makes this baffling sensation tangible as the reader is left to wonder about what is not being said. And the fog itself can become text, “a bundle of yellowed love letters washed ashore, waiting to be read” (Nilsen 2017, 15). The poem titled simply “Fog” describes some of the various mist species and their behaviours, including the unpleasant-sounding “fish milt / fog, slap-in-the-face fog, fog that smells / of a logger’s boot” (Nilsen 2017, 15). The fog is both watchful and mischievous, as in “a pond of bulging frog eyes fog, / that drops poems in your lap and sinks / pebbles in your pocket” (Nilsen 2017, 15).

The ear stone is a chance for orientation in a disorienting world, a hidden topography that is difficult but not impossible to find and read. And the West Coast fog that rolls through these poems might be an intermediary between human and ocean; it might be a psychopomp, guiding people from one world to another. Composed of water droplets suspended heavily in the air, the fog might also be a ghost, or a metaphor for aging, or a symbol of loss. Among other things, *Otolith* is a book of questions: mysteries that cannot always be solved under a microscope.

Kelly Shepherd