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Book Review: Desi Di Nardo, *The Cure Is a Forest* (Guernica Editions, 2011). Reviewed by Jessica Travis

I have to make a literary confession. Harboring resentment from my second-year Canadian literature class, perhaps, I am not the most ardent enthusiast of nature literature, despite my professor's attempt to make Susanna Moodie's *Roughing It in the Bush* accessible to a group of undergraduates. Until now, that is. Having completed Desi Di Nardo's most recent release, *The Cure Is a Forest* (Guernica Editions, 2011), I can say with great confidence that this nature poetry skeptic is becoming a believer.



Di Nardo wastes no time setting the tone for her sophomore collection of poetry. While the title of the collection calls for a “cure” to some implied ailment, the smartly paired epigraphs illuminate a fissure, a potentially debilitating cleft in the human-made world: a disregard for and dislocation from nature and, in many ways, the poetic tradition. As Pablo Neruda’s “The Poet” is “devoured” by the lily “in a sudden/disturbance of bubbles and blossoms” in the first epigraph, Henry Beston places animal life “in a world older and more

complete than ours,” on a different plane of life and of sensory experience in the second. Macrocosmically, *The Cure Is a Forest* comments on the destructive belief that we as people have some inherent and unjustifiable control over our environmental surroundings – “we choose to imagine a footpath/Carved for us alone” (“A Path for Trees”) – and, subsequently, the right to do with it what we will. The collection asks, “what might happen to the swamp/...when the harmonious calls are muted/And a hundred living things evanesce?” (“Morning Glory”). More microcosmically, the role and existence of the poet and the arts in contemporary culture is drawn into question. There is a “cure,” nonetheless. Through the course of the collection, Di Nardo weaves a narrative of the endurance and survival of nature, of the poet, and of humanity through their ability to adapt and regenerate, forging stronger bonds with each other.



Moving seamlessly from the epigraphs into her first and title poem, "The Cure Is a Forest," Di Nardo explores the seemingly binaristic interactions between the artificiality and regimented machinations of the human-created and the fluidity of the natural world: "Mammals in order/march" along the man-made trail running

through the forest, "soft paws" making "rhythmic steps" along the forest floor. Yet somehow the creatures of the forest manage to circumvent the militaristic imposition of humanity, as "parasites infiltrate/behind conifers" and the breeding coyote's signal the regeneration of the natural in the depths of late winter and in spite of intrusive footpaths.

In the rich poems that spill forth beyond this introductory gem, Di Nardo plays with contrasting imagery, shadows reverberating delicately off of light, and rhetorical turns of phrases. She captures vivid intersections of, most often, human hands, feet, and shadows with the natural elements that envelop them. Capturing the smallest moments, seconds of time it seems, she intersperses poems of human experience, professing one's love "in a blue canoe" ("Adrift on Duclos Point"), where the role of nature is often forgotten with poems about nature itself. What looms over the entire collection, however, is the shadow of the poet. Verging on "the great dying," it seems as though poetries are to be "asphyxiated in junkyards/With heaps of tires and seagull bones" ("The Great Dying").

Yet, as the title suggests, this need not be so. The poet finds survival and endurance through their union and alliance with nature and that which surrounds them already. Often working within longstanding poetic conventions and form, Di Nardo plays with tradition by largely shirking the use of punctuation, just as the title poem's "parasites infiltrate" the aestheticism of the rowed conifers. Bridging the gap between the structured mechanics of the human-made and that which is natural and comes naturally, Di Nardo breathes new life into the already well-established canon of Canadian nature poetry by refusing to forge new paths through the forest. Rather, she embraces the bracken that surrounds her, the tradition and paths that precede *The Cure Is a Forest* and makes an intelligently beautiful return to the Canadian literary wilderness.

**Note – Photo of Desi Di Nardo credited to Mass Noce.*