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The Nature of Right Now

Brittney Corrigan. *The Ghost Town Collectives and other stories of the Anthropocene*. Southern Colorado, Middle Creek Publishing and Audio, 2024.

The catastrophic events in Brittney Corrigan's collection, *The Ghost Town Collectives and other stories of the Anthropocene*, could happen as soon as tomorrow, in a decade or three, or maybe yesterday. Hurricanes, melting glaciers, disappearing species, extended drought, deadly disease and a pandemic: catastrophes take place in story after story, narrative strands that spiral and repeat like Vico's theory of history. As a whole, the collection is a poignant elegy for the earth shifting under our feet.

The question Corrigan returns to again and again is, who or what can survive when the ecological shit hits the fan? Corrigan's characters embody human resilience and/or resignation as they confront a natural world corrupted and gone rogue. Most of the characters don't flinch too much, knowing the present is unprecedented because it has never happened before, this exact moment, until it happens again and again. The movingly drawn characters are ciphers who resonate with dreams, desires, and despair. I am in love with Silje in the story, "The Vault," who is the keeper of the Global Seed Vault, and the last living human in the cold, remote town where it's located. Silje's isolation generates suspense due to naturalism's mandate that those who live alone must die alone. Even a pyrrhic victory feels like a miracle. Corrigan inhabits the consciousnesses of sentient beings indiscriminately, representing the minds of a polar bear and a leopard.

If alone we are doomed, together we might find purpose, company, and compassion, even in a polluted world. The most optimistic story, "The Auction House," is a steam punk fantasy involving costumes and a mystery auction where the villain is a megalomaniac. The most tender story is, "The Care Home," where a toxic Gorgon and other "Mythics" share love and acceptance. A few characters demonstrate optimism, a surprise given the collection's theme of imminent extinction.

Creature suffering and ecological crisis frequently mirror each other, like the dry twig of an anorexic body reflected in a drought-stricken orchard. One of the pleasures of the collection is the ways the details dovetail to achieve well-wrought narrative arcs. Nature is an enigma, as "The Great Unconformity" reminds us, with "one billion

years of missing geologic time,” apparent in layers of sedimentary rock. We can catalog the rock, take pictures of the rock, and generate hypothesis, but the rock stares mutely back.

Not all characters are so reticent. In the story, “Over and Back,” Martha/Marty, a senior in high school, dreams of leaving the island in Chesapeake Bay where she lives to become an NBA referee. She wants to leave before the island is washed away by the rising sea. While adults on the island talk about “politician and seawalls, still thinking something can be done,” Marty is a wannabe realist. She stares into the face of a raging hurricane and calls foul by blowing her whistle.

Is it a happy ending when the last creature through the gate to extinction is a worn out, world-weary human? Brittney Corrigan’s debut collection of stories is a must-read for those of us who despair that the world is on fire, who feel alienated and even terrified of the next catastrophe, roving virus, or general annihilation. Maybe the world is on fire, but at least Corrigan’s characters can keep us company until the last embers turn cold.