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On Earth as It Is, by Michael Todd Steffen
Cervena Barva Press, 2022 53 pages, \$16.00

Review by Denise Provost

The day after I finished reading *On Earth as It Is*, a panel of the world's foremost scientists warned the world's nations – again - of the climate consequences of our escalating greenhouse gas emissions. Sea levels are on track to rise several feet, to make islands and seacoasts uninhabitable. The floods, droughts, heat, fire, storms, and plagues already bringing hunger, displacement, and elevated death tolls to our world will only accelerate if our fossil fuel consumption patterns continue.

Covering this report on February 28, 2022, the Washington Post calls it “a warning letter to a world on the brink,” noting that “averting the worst-case scenarios will require nothing less than transformational change on a global scale.” In its accompanying “Postcards from Earth's Climate Futures,” the Post features a series of images of familiar places, under a range of future climate conditions. Those featuring Yosemite National Park show projected changes around Half Dome.

Half Dome is probably one of the world's most recognized geologic features, thanks to the work of photographer Ansel Adams. In the exquisite poem bearing Adams' name, Somerville poet Michael Steffen characterizes him this way:

*“Hawk of vision, his hunger was
to appraise his subject on earth as it is,
not narrowing for extraction....”*

*So much of what he aspired to take
and therefore leave was land on land
on land...”*

Somewhere between restrained warning letter and delicate elegy, Steffen's poems lovingly document features of our “world on the brink.” The poems in this collection include some enormous themes. There are poems about “Geology” (“what has been/has been again and again/while time's unique utterances/keep vanishing....”) the oceans (“the business/of the sails of cloud/stacked like the coasts' glass mountains/these Aeolian beings, drawing from it/fertile rain, shimmering nets/and devastating storms....”) and the whole insect kingdom (“they were always in my path/in the long grass hopping, landing, swarming/at the intersections/of my world and theirs.”)

Intermingled with these wide-angled – yet detailed – views are those which emerge when the poet's eye zooms in to the particular. We meet the Osage Orange tree, “whose fruit is green/ caught out as Mock; fiber/ deemed chief for weapons and called Bowwood;” “the Mulberry, whose silkworms/wove a road from China/to the Mediterranean/kimono by ki-



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mono." Then there are the sequoias, in whose grove we see "the rain and the shaken leaves, the swifts in front/of the storm, the hawk in the silence after."

Some in the literary world seem determined to create taxonomies for the classification of all poetry; from some of these determined classifiers has come the ghastly term "ecopoetry." There is a developing poetic consciousness which sees nature less as Eden and more as approaching apocalypse, but it deserves a better name, which honors it as a poetry of witness. Elisa Gabbert, writing in *The New York Review of Books* in 2020, notes the emergence of "what can only be called climate poetry, a poetry full of fire and flooding and refugees."

Yet the poems in *On Earth as It Is* do not scream disaster but speak appreciation. We view at close range the snake; the walleye; a bird, and a fly trapped indoors; sea turtles in "the frenzy on the beach/under the moonlight where scavenger gulls/flock to the baby crawlers as they hatch/clambering seaward." We glimpse "grass of Kentucky/Wing of blackbird, cascade, full full moon."

There is a nostalgia here, too, for traces of the human world, alluded to on the macro scale in "Geology": "ice shelf to/inland sea excavation/book written over/overwritten footprints/of civilizations...." In other poems, the fading artifacts are particular, and intimately close in time. They are old movies (Westerns, Mae West), a ball game at Wrigley field, a remembered moment in 1967 when "Aunt Donna warned and sipped from her iced tea/The glass beaded with sweat. It is so present/The smell of wet dog imbuing the shag carpet/The dust on the shelves with the family photos...."

The only references to our climate crisis are indirect, ironic, as in "Poem for Rachel Carson." Almost as an aside, a note to self, is the instruction, "Doodle a frown/face by the passage/all about Prometheus and his/beneficial/then rampant fire." The most formally structured piece of the collection, "All Imagery," uses form and tone as distancing mechanisms: "End of the world, now shouldn't that be alarming?/Keep busy, business says. Nobody knows/It's just a lot of hoopla, this global warming....The dire poem, how dare it be charming?"

For all its charms, *On Earth as It Is* does not let readers off easy. The stunning first poem in this book begins "Little vessel of my soul/sit with this uneasiness...." That disquiet trails as a subtext in the poems that follow, until, reaching the book's culminating poem, "Bark," we are ready to embark with the poem's narrator on to the "Calloused peel of trees" where "I scraped hands/elbows and knees/on the rough knobby grooved out-sides/struggling up for a view of things."

Michael Steffen's view of Earth is definitely one worth seeing.