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Under the Mountain Born,  
John Swain  
Least Bittern Books, 2015  
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Reviewed by Catherine Vlahos

Grab your granola bars and hiking boots, because we're going camping. Maybe. Honestly, "camping" is possibly too manufactured of a word to describe the trip John Swain's poetry collection *Under the Mountain Born* embarks on. Regardless, get ready to kiss your comfortable bed and smartphone goodbye.

Swain acts as a tour guide to mystical, sacred places and scenes in the natural world that you can't really reproduce in a trail mix commercial. He calmly observes both the most delicate and devastating of nature's forces in his collection of 100 poems:

**Chrysalis like a glass tomb rises  
lit by sinews clinging  
to bones and hairlocks and nails.**

and the most devastating:

**Tables of waves  
in the night  
like commandment**

With a reverence that suddenly makes you think, "Maybe the author isn't exactly human, either."

With this tantalizing thought in mind, Swain remains distant as a narrator—while many poems are written in first person, the focus is clearly on the vibrant, wild imagery of ancient, hallowed forces of life—summer and winter, birth and death, flight and ground, water and rock. We often equate nature with solitude and simplicity (see: *Walden*), and the sheer raw energy of Swain's crisp prose carries the weight of isolation as he explores these pairings through different animal guides. Raptors and wild dogs often appear throughout *Under the Mountain Born*, and here together in "After the Path":

**The light released  
waves chasing like a song dog,  
all the afternoon  
moves your shoulder to wing,  
swimming beneath an osprey  
entangled in talons like a lover  
as the sea dreams and I wake.**

Swain collects these animal traits like a shaman along our journey to reveal to us mortals a world distinctly supernatural among the familiar physical world we live in, and it soon becomes clear that he is not alone in this voyage.

A woman's presence is made apparent in pieces like "Hibiscus Tea," which serves as both a campsite and a time for human bonding amidst wild, magical, and sometimes frightening forces. In the desolation of

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the first frigid winter night, they work together for a common purpose—whether it is some sort of transcendence or merely survival is not for us to discover:

**In the drift on the hill  
we warmed beneath my coat and  
sipped hibiscus tea  
from a silver bowl I carried.  
Trees floated from the ice as  
she polished a rabbit jaw  
and dropped prayer beads  
to mark our path.  
Fear darkened my heart,  
so I kneeled on my teeth  
broken to rejoicing her.**

The woman adds an element of humanity and intimacy to Swain's pieces, yet he alludes to human sexuality with the same reverence and power he worships with nature in his works. "Torch," is a powerful example of the precarious balance between passion and fear:

I looked at you  
like a deer  
and raised your legs  
around my waist  
in flight  
and stillness.

It is clear by now that *Under the Mountain Born* is far from your average nature hike, and Swain is far from your average narrator. His words and the vivid scenes they breathe life into are truly beautiful—honestly, they would look great on some hip wall art, to abruptly transition back to the modern world of materialism. I'd hang those posters up all over my room not only to admire the beauty and care behind their stories, but also perhaps to get lost, to every so often bewhisked away into Swain's magical, fearsome world of spirits, creatures, and wilderness.