

Robert Martens, *little creatures*. Victoria, B.C.: Ekstasis Editions, 2013. Pp. 86. Softcover, \$21.95.

Robert Martens is not the first poet who finds in creeping, crawling or flying creatures material and inspiration for poetry. Emily Dickinson hears a fly buzz in a poem about death; John Donne's well known love poem employs a flea in an analogy spun to persuade a reluctant lover; Sylvia Plath's posthumous collection *Ariel* includes poems about beekeeping; and the didactic poetry of the Bible admonishes the sluggard to learn from the ant.

Martens begins his debut collection, *little creatures*, with the unsettling line: "the creatures of twilight are dying." In the poems that follow, the poet/narrator, equipped with a virtual microscope and patient attentiveness, guides his readers on a field trip to observe the little – and possibly doomed – creatures in action. The butterfly, for instance, emerges from the cocoon, "...her wings, her joy, balanced/ on a twig, antennae trembling to/ the swirl of leaf and petal." Equally sensuous though less pretty, the fly "...rubs her legs together, she cleans./ /she's clambered the dog turd in/ the corner, tottered through the/cobweb behind the fridge. she's/ scuttled through dustclumps around/ the toilet."

This poet/guide is not a neutral, objective scientist, but rather insists on finding connections between the observer and the observed. The caterpillars is not just bristled fur with a "hump and bump" way of moving. Rather:

he's larger than you
now, you have to follow, he's your
guide through this wonderland. you might be
alice, naked child, in a grass forest.

The kinship thus established is ramped up in the following lines from "the snail's exile":

...wherever
you are, my love, my
nothing, my nearness,
you are home.

These tender words conclude the first section. Comforting though they seem, they can't quite blot out the elegiac thread running through these poems: the little creatures, including those who prey on others, are threatened in their home environment. By

predators. By the possibility of extinction. “[T]his is war, but/ who’s the enemy, and what would victory/ be?”

The poet’s tools are lively language, sensory details, short taut lines, lots of lists and unexpected line breaks. These devices are mostly effective as in “centipede marathon,” which, quite aptly, goes on and on, though upon second reading it may begin to resemble exercise.

Also threatened with change, and in need of home, are the “more creatures” in the second, longer, section of the book. These are mostly human and, unsurprisingly, include Mennonites. Martens pays tribute to his parents. His father, having lived through “... the soviet/ terror, the typhus, famine,” and flight, would not “break the rules – but he bent them, behind their backs,” doing so for the sake of keeping peace. In another poem Martens imagines meeting his failing, arthritic mother “on the threshold/ of grace.”

The half-dozen Mennonite content poems, whether about family members or a guest choir conductor in the Mennonite colonies in Russia, demonstrate the poet’s interest in his people’s story and sensitivity to their experience of “looking for a home” (sub-title of the second section).

In the poem titled “who made thee?” the reader may expect a lamb, but instead, echoing the first section’s little creatures, Martens offers a flea, or rather a cloud of pesky fleas, wryly juxtaposing the ghost of a flea (or fly) with the holy ghost. The line “...we// poets, william, are a/ lunatic bunch, scavengers/feeding on broken/ light...” may signal the poet’s reaching for Blakean vision, a vision that leans toward the fantastic.

All creatures, great and small, live out their lives within the context of a larger world, a world fraught with uncertainty and menace. In the second section the dangers that lurk are suggested in poem titles like “terrorist,” “accidental armageddon” and “junkworld.” The failings of contemporary human culture are pointed out in lines that are poetic rather than angry, the sadness tempered with humour edging sometimes toward satire.

...i should be in mourning. should
grieve our garbage planet. but
they’ve been so generous, thrown it
all away, and now it’s mine;
the sparrow’s perfect rhyme, the
caterpillar’s complete crawl,
the coffee’s black morning fog,
the gum on my heel, the stain
on the carpet, the chip in the
door, the cat’s green eye, the

bruised heel, the drop of draining
oil, the lurch, the shudder, the
wind, the fatigue, the weed's
farewell, the rain's race...

Martens offers his readers a sensual feast brimming with vibrant imagery and energy enough for more to come.

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