Garth Martens, *Prologue for the Age of Consequence.* Toronto: House of Anansi Press, 2014. Softcover, $19.95.

Prologue for the Age of Consequence is the work of an assured, ambitious, and enormously talented poet, one who is capable of dazzling linguistic play and philosophically resonant imagery. However, the publisher has done a minor disservice by presenting this collection as being about the tar sands and climate change, when in fact the shadows of bitumen extraction can only be found in the extreme margins of the book. Readers expecting a meditation on petroculture and the anthropocene will be confused, if not disappointed. Those who look further, though, will find a compelling and frightening psychogeography of labour and masculinity in a colonial context. This book is about the culture of monumental construction as it is practiced, and fetishized, in the modern Western world. With poems that range from vividly realized character studies to philosophical reflections on monumentalism and its inevitable failure, Garth Martens leads us to a more nuanced understanding of the consequences of a technologized and gendered modernity that we are already deeply embedded in.

A central metaphor of the book is the building of a tower, a gigantic edifice that reaches toward the sky with no greater purpose than to prove the extent and power of human ambition. Poems trace the lives and dreams of the workers who give their labour, and sometimes their lives, in service of this enormous symbol of power that paradoxically renders the workers insect-like by its

very scale. Indeed, the other key metaphor of the collection is the recurrent imagery of insects, which are constant unwelcome companions of the construction workers, causing annoyance and sometimes leading to fatal moments of inattention. Like ants and bees, the workers labour on something much larger than themselves, and their own individuality is dwarfed by the magnitude of their collective effort. Unlike insects, however, the ultimate goal of these men's work is not the survival and perpetuation of the community, but is instead the glorification of the few—the wealthy and powerful who will one day occupy the penthouse suites of the tower, gazing down on the miniscule people walking below. In this context, the workers' labour is part of an enormous theatre of hubris.

Unlike modernist poems of mega-construction projects like E. J. Pratt's *Towards the Last Spike* or Hart Crane's *The Bridge,* in this book the gigantic project's end is in its beginning. The fall of the tower is present from the very moment of its first dreaming, and indeed the cycle of construction and destruction is a governing principle of the book. Construction *is* destruction for Martens. To build a tower, you must dig a pit. From the tower of Babel to the Twin Towers, the pit always remains nested in the form of the building, waiting to reassert itself, gradually or catastrophically. *Prologue for the Age of Consequence* explores this phenomenon on an individual scale as well as a civilizational one, beginning with the story of a boy who emulates his father's construction work while playing on the riverbank, "erect[ing] a gaunt fortress of root, mud and splintered stave." As the boy works on his project, he fashions himself after his father, but at the same time he remains aware of the temporary and perhaps futile nature of his activity, embedding a gesture of reverse archaeology into his construction:

> Before the tower sank with itself
> ebbing in the gorged river, he pressed
> a toy figure where the earth was soft,
> buried it with a fingertip, closed it under dark.

With this action, reminiscent of Wordsworth's symbolic flourishes in *The Prelude,* Martens reveals that the boy is closer to the truth about the meaning of construction than the adult men in the book. The boy understands that the building of a monument is at the same time a burial, an invocation of death's erasure, an acknowledgment of human inconsequence in the larger scale of time and space. The river will eventually rise, the movement of silt will

always eventually undermine whatever is built on the bank. The towers of past civilizations are now found beneath the ground.

The echoes of masculine British Romanticism are strong in this volume, from Blake's artist-labourer Los, "eternally building, eternally destroying," to Shelley's "Ozymandias," with its evocation of the ruination of absolute power. In keeping with that Romantic strain of thinking, the politics of striving are foregrounded in this book, but largely embedded within the stories of working-class men who commit their bodies and their energies to bringing the dreams of anonymous capitalists into physical reality. Unlike most labour poetry, Martens approaches his subject with dense, allusive, and self-consciously poetic language, and the result is both memorable and unusual. Though written in an athletic anti-demotic language that the men themselves would never speak, these poems nonetheless provide a remarkable entry into their psyches and their tangled relationships with power. Martens never speaks down to these characters; instead he ventures into their dreams, their half-forgotten memories, their aspirations for the future. The result is a nuanced evocation of class and gender, one that is not afraid to explore acts of aggression and sabotage while at the same time maintaining a palpable empathy for these flawed and sometimes fatally misguided characters.

The poems in the collection that move beyond the lives of the workers and reach more directly for grand philosophical import are sometimes not as successful, tending toward overly fancified diction and abstractions that can be opaque to the reader. At times in these less-grounded pieces, the language seems to be a little too much in love with itself, and dense poeticism verges toward self-indulgence. In these places, the highly pressured and self-consciously "difficult" language feels like a tool misapplied, leading us away from the essence of the poem rather than toward it. Nevertheless, despite these occasional lapses, this book is a significant achievement. Martens is a gifted wordsmith and philosopher of the physical world, and a deft observer of the ideologies and mythologies that condition our present and our looming future. This book is pitched perfectly for our current ominous age, in which the most powerful man in the world is a builder of towers.

Warren Cariou
University of Manitoba