

Patrick Friesen, *Songen: New Poems*. Salt Spring Island, BC: Mother Tongue Publishing, 2018. Pp. 106. Softcover, \$19.95.

Patrick Friesen, award-winning poet, translator, and playwright who has worked with choreographers, dancers, musicians, and composers, pays careful attention to the sounds and rhythms of language, its flow and interruptions and wild dance in his newest collection, *Songen*. The words “songen,” “syngen,” “singen,” and “dauncin” repeat throughout existential meditations, Friesen’s “songs of the body,” complemented with sketches of an old man dancing, a reflection of Goya’s old man, or the speaker of these poems, portrayed by Friesen’s artist friend listed only as “RH.”

Friesen states his *ars poetica* in an epigraph from the lines of James Joyce—“to be elusive of social or religious orders”—and the ideas, languages, and genres of his poems fulfill this opening promise. A richly textured collection of free verse poems, *Songen* is replete with musical allusions to a plethora of musical genres, from Mozart and Schubert to Mavis Staples. With the DNA of a blackbird, Friesen intersperses first language, including Low German, High German, Middle English, and slang, as well as references to scripture in his poetry. Friesen addresses and responds to an array of poets such as Auden, Blake, and Rilke, as well as Henry Vaughan and Ulrikka Gernes. The voices of John Berryman, Patrick O’Connell, and Patrick O’Neil echo in Friesen’s use of fractured syntax and slang to convey disorder, and of Ian Dunn and Thomas Traherne as Friesen challenges interpretations of scripture. At seventy-two years old, the poet reflects on the uneasy relationship he has with his childhood and its framing of certainty in religious language, holding that “language is all play, and nothing more.” The greatest strength of language is its diversity, Friesen notes, enabling him to navigate the dances he embraces in this collection, bending away from the extremes of sentimentality and anger.

In poems that address ancestors and aging, memory and disposition, and mortality, youthful drunken revelry (in scenes from 1968) transgresses the restrictive fundamentalist faith of the era: “we were songen / you know, because we were dying, we were dying / and rejoicing in our pagan hymns.” And as the poems challenge the speaker’s tradition with its certitude, the speaker is both pagan and seeker:

what you  
ask is a request and an invitation,  
waiting a lifetime for an answer

that doesn't come ... and you  
 still asking for an answer that  
 never was, but asking anyway, inviting the voice,  
 a traveler, to a supper in a bare room...

In Friesen's work, "jeschnauta," or "chattering," directly challenges what he calls theology's "palaver and yakking, the blah, blah, / blah," that has lost the wonder, and is preoccupied with "the wrong questions." These poems, located at the centre of the book, are at the heart of this work on what it means to become human, "conceyved in longing" and "grasping for the song."

As the poems consider history and its ghosts, mothers and their stolen sons, or grandfathers with their watery eyes, the strange light (*irrlight*) shimmers, vanishes, and reappears. The motif of moon, which poets have always considered an image of love and death, is a refrain throughout and, here, also the image of new life: "her swollen moon and him paging through a baby book"; or evoking later-in-life tenderness as "(e)ven her shadow, as she moves past the windows, is beautiful, moonlight melting through the blinds." In concert with the moon as image of life or death is the reappearing image of skulls. Sometimes they are made one, as in "the moon's grinning skull." Perhaps death is its own strange light.

Blackbirds, too, fly away and reappear throughout the collection, and various phrases repeat as if a refrain, yet *Songen's* range of imagery and language always surprises. And for this reader, the Low German language of my childhood leaves me with the tempo of my own impermanence. "[Y]ou're seven on your back in the tall grass," Friesen writes. "[Y]ou are no one, seventy years of earth, waiting for the low note, like a shadow, *verdorren* [to wither and die] *wie grass*." Poems such as "foda" (father) take me back to family funerals in church basements, with *Zockastetja* and *koffee*, *zwieback*, *tjees*, and sorrow. "flautrich" describes "the heart fluttering...like a flame in a cave."

The delight of this collection is that it insists on the wild dance between memory and death, the journey that becomes memory, the pace of it like these one-sentence poems without capital letters. These are Friesen's songs of the body, beating with resistance, acceptance, humour, and love, and "the human task, the walking... song and talk, woven into braids of smoke."

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