

think: devotion is a sound, / not a weight, as I would have thought before.”

Showing a performer’s awareness of the importance of beginnings and endings, *Cloud Physics* finishes as strongly as it begins. I will let her words close this review, as well, but I hope it will encourage readers to seek out the rest of the collection. From the last poem of the collection, “Its Own Beauty”:

A match in the night it was,
lit, but not contagious.
Its own beauty it was, a self
within a flame, within
a white burning.
And we held it for the time it took,
held in there in the dark,
our flicker of history.

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Todd Davis, *Native Species*. East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2019. Pp. 110. Softcover, \$19.95.

Todd Davis, like naturalist and fellow American writer Annie Dillard, is a stalker and an explorer of the natural world. His new poetry collection, *Native Species*, invites readers to join a guided tour into habitats where fish and fowl, mammals, reptiles, and myriad insects breed and multiply. Where they hunt and are hunted. Where they must adapt to a shifting landscape and precarious weather or die.

This foray into the natural world is neither casual nor occasional. It requires alertness of the senses and attentiveness that is both curious and contemplative, qualities that, when practiced faithfully over time, become a habit of being in the world and ultimately generate a desire to bear witness.

Fortunately, our guide in this collection has those qualities, and also possesses impressive artistic skills. The witness, therefore, is expressed in poems of beauty and depth of engagement. Their strength comes, at times, from lines that are simple and unassuming: “A gray fox falls through the river ice and drowns.” So begins a poem describing an animal’s corpse encased in ice. It ends in disbelief at “the shape of former suffering.”

At other times the reader will be surprised by unusual connections: “A shed antler like a crown removed before sleep,” reads one poem; “the bones of a bear cub / curved in a circle of trust,” reads another. Always, Davis’s language is descriptive, precise, and sensual. Lines like the following should be read aloud and savoured without haste: “the soul slips / its fingers / from the wool / of winter, unshucks / and floats above / the sleeping frames / of flesh, the idle / smell of sex.” The alliteration and the lush vowels in words like “flesh” and “sex” can almost be tasted on the tongue.

Although the life and habitat of birds and animals may seem to dominate in *Native Species*, Davis is equally attuned to the life and change in the human landscape. Right from the opening poems, he points to human connectedness with the natural world: “. . . our minds flood with rivers and creeks, and we find it / hard to speak,” he writes, “except in mud and stone.” All creatures for whom this planet is home, are subject to the cycle of birth and death; all know pleasure and pain, suffering and loss. The kinship of all species runs like a thread through the pages, often suggested through unexpected but apt juxtapositioning: “The trilling / of a hermit thrush / spirals a song / through a sky of budded branches, / and my wife’s hair trails across my cheek.” Similarly, “Finding a skull” opens, “A jawbone bleached by winter,” and goes on to ponder:

What its owner thought as death crowded
The space behind the ear.

How can we judge the animal who takes pleasure
In the sumptuous licking of flesh, even the eyeholes

Cleaned of their meat. The new mantra of sustainability
Sounds like flies buzzing on the lips of bureaucrats
Who forget death consumes everything

When Davis turns his fuller attention to the human world, however, he often turns to story-telling. “My Mother’s Cooking” begins with a candid description of a woman whose housekeeping habits are haphazard—ants in the flour; “roaches scurrying under the refrigerator”—and ends poignantly, with her small son kissing her awake from Harlequin-induced dreams before he boards the bus for school.

“Hard Winter,” by contrast, catalogues a season of loss in the neighbourhood: industrial accident, child abuse, drowning, illness and death. As elsewhere in this collection, Davis integrates the natural world into his account, interspersing his list of human tragedy with reminders that the cold kills ash borer and deer ticks,

and ice storms damage trees. “Most things will recover,” is the narrator’s hopeful, though somewhat reserved, comment. The poem ends with lines that display the poet’s characteristic compassion and hint at human culpability and responsibility:

I worry about the girl though, what was done to her
and the way people talk, a mix of sympathy and gossip, salt
and cinders thrown out by plow trucks, grass not growing
near the road, some of it torn up and needing to be reseeded.

Here, as throughout the collection, Davis does not aim to push at the edges of style or form. Instead he strives for clarity and depth. His unique accomplishment is to intertwine the vicissitudes of all species in a way that is natural and authentic.

Poet Tim Lilburn defines contemplation as “a form of knowing that strains across distance between mind and world and aims to end in union with what it seeks.” It is, he says, a desire to know what remains unknowable; a yearning to “[live] in the world as if it were home.” Such knowing can never be complete and the yearned-for union may never be fully realized. And yet for Davis, it seems clear, both are worth striving for. His poems are born out of contemplation that results from unhurried and faithful attention, season after season, to the whole spectrum of native species.

In an age when we are regularly alerted to the alarming extinction of species, and to violence being done to creatures great and small, *Native Species* invites us to marvel. But it also offers a timely reminder that it is not enough to look *at*, we must also look *after*, our planet and its many inhabitants.

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Works Cited

Lilburn, Tim. *Living In The World As If It Were Home*. Toronto: Cormorant Books, 1999.

Ann Hostetler, *Safehold*. Telford, PA: Cascadia Publishing House, 2018. DreamSeeker Poetry Series 15. Pp. 95. Softcover, \$12.95.

It is not surprising that in seasons of great reckoning or transition, we turn to art forms like poetry—born out of great flurries of emotion and energy, but also practiced stillness—to help steady us.