Robert Martens, *city of beasts.* Victoria, BC: Ekstasis Editions, 2020. Pp. 127. Softcover, $23.95.

It's easy to imagine West Coast poet Robert Martens singing Bill Staines's song "All God's Critters Got a Place in the Choir." In his latest collection, *city of beasts*, Martens draws careful attention to the dailiness and dangers that constitute life for the diverse inhabitants on planet earth.

He begins with the human species. The first section, titled "paternoster / patermater: a memoir," intersperses coming of age narrative with earlier Mennonite experiences of suffering and flight. A string of images—"long hair, head bands / and placards"—describes the narrator's rebellious youth, during which he is said to have "plotted the birth of a holy age" (15), while a rapid-fire burst of war imagery records what the narrator's forebears endured: "guns / greased with rape, / and burning horses, / and rivers of blood and semen" (12). Such harsh imagery jars with the poem's title, borrowed from a familiar hymn: "unter deinem sanften Fittich," or "Beneath your Soft Wings." Juxtaposing youthful revolutionary impulses with violence of the Russian Revolution can be startling; interspersing this with references to prayer and scripture results in work that is both ironic and poignant.

Martens's engagement with his Mennonite story, past and present, is reminiscent of his first collection, *little creatures*, where that interest was strongly present. In that book, the poet trained his magnifying glass on creeping crawling, flitting things. In *city of beasts*, he lets his imagination loose on larger creatures, whose exploits and travails provide a wealth of raw material. Following in the tradition of fables, where stories about animals mirror human foibles and failings, the poet infuses his contemporary versions with his unique blend of insight and humour. Poem titles such as "the wise owl" and "the laughing hyena" highlight the characteristic that, for humans, has come to define each "beast," but Martens doesn't place his animals on farms or in the wilderness. Instead, he sets them loose in a contemporary urban environment where they behave no better than humans. The fox "sells desert time share to polar bears" (37), the crocodile sheds tears for "his misspent youth" (36), and the blind mole's digging threatens to undermine urban infrastructure: "streets will tremble," we are told, in "the sinking city" (28).

Cities are safe and nurturing places for neither humans nor beasts, the poems seem to say. In Martens's city, all creatures experience being swindled or stepped on, and all survival involves struggle. Attitudes toward this struggle range from the mole's "worry he will not" survive at all, to the beaver's relentless determination to

keep building. In "an elephant never forgets" (57), Martens turns the fable concept inside out: a grandmother elephant tells her grandson a story about humans who "with stones and spears and guns and bombs" once roamed the earth. She calms her restless child with the assurance that "human time / wasn't long." These words ring ominously in the reader's ear.

The subjects in the last half of the book range widely, but continue the opening sections' inversion of expectations. The characters include the bizarre, such as a snake-handling preacher (81), the ordinary, such as a tired mother at the checkout with her kids (67), and the violent, such as men plotting "a bit of excitement" in Paris (105). A rogues' gallery of historic figures appears, including "the (un)holy trinity" (90) of Darwin, Freud, and Einstein, who are pictured delivering lectures, eating breakfast, or naked, as well as "stalinhitlermao," who are allowed to "feel at / peace" over sweet coffee, but are then given "jellied / raven for dessert" (89).

Whether levelled through animal or human stories, Marten's critique of culture is mournful rather than condemning. In his poem "i saw the best minds of," for example, the broken narrator becomes the city itself:

> so howl, dear hearts, break your
> poems of cadenced measure, howl
> as though the universe unloved is dying
> in your lap, as though the hunted
> gods of cities lost have found the
> hole in your heart, and your heart
> is a slum… (97)

Elsewhere, Martens places wickedness and suffering side by side but does so with empathy, as in his portrait of the dirty pig who, like the contented cow, fears being rendered:

> … wakes beside a dumpster, staggers to her feet, she sniffs the drugged and garbaged air, oh her lost home, her children, she sniffs the fragrance of green country. (31)

The ease with which Martens moves from animals to art to politics reflects a wide-ranging curiosity about all aspects of life on planet earth. The poems that result are energetic, rhythmic, and rich in imagery. Lists, wordplay, and rhyme lend lightness to the work, even when the subject is difficult, as illustrated in "to merry folk who rant and roar":

> to all the dicks who run our lives

to lawyers' suits & business ties
to the freedom of a beery road
to handsome snake and horny toad
    so drain the glass
    & gullet pour
    we beggars four
    at god's good door (120)

Readers may sometimes feel pulled in too many directions in this collection, and may find it difficult to keep up with Marten's shifting focus and tone. But careful readers will be won over by a voice that refuses to take itself too seriously, which sees clearly and yet insists on clinging to hope:

…i'm stranded
in my own wordy mind. In
the postapocalypse of poetry
solitary man, migrant,
mumbling vain threats
that beauty will win in the end. (127)

Sarah Klassen
Winnipeg

David Saul Bergman, *Unpardonable Sins.* Eugene, OR: Resource Publications, 2021. Pp. 208. Softcover, $21.

What is the unpardonable sin? Do ancient notions of violation and abomination have a place in contemporary North American life? These questions preoccupy John Reimer, the fifty-nine-year-old protagonist and pastor of Chicago's Lakeview Mennonite church as he seeks to unravel the circumstances behind a gruesome murder in *Unpardonable Sins,* the new novel by Daniel Born and Dale Suderman, published under the pen name of David Saul Bergman. But though themes of sin and redemption resound throughout the narrative, the novel is ultimately about a more quotidian subject: namely, how an aging Mennonite man—one who grew up speaking Low German on a farm in western Kansas—makes sense of the mores of a diverse and gentrifying Chicago, and of his progressive, intellectually engaged congregation.

Unpardonable Sins opens with the murder of David Talbot, a twentysomething bicycle messenger whose death is initially reported as another in a series of unsolved killings of gay men on