

Life other than human

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Review: *Dog Latin*

by Norman Morrissey

So strong is the impression these poems give of Norman Morrissey's affinity with his natural surroundings that people seem rather scarce in them.

Mostly the poems are redolent of the quietness and solitude one imagines to prevail in and around Morrissey's five acres in Hogsback. In this mind-, eye-, and ear-sharpening retreat he registers the shape, sound and movement of mostly other than human life, and the variations in light and temperature that govern it. Nor does the life have to be cuddly to arouse the poet's tenderness and compassion:

Light grows,
shivering things
creep out on the rock to warm

— and little songbirds hawk them.

I set poison
and a rat came out to die;
and a day or so on
two of her brood scabbled blind
through a crack
to pant on the floor like starveling
whippets;

and they nestled in my palm as I
took them quick to drown,
nuzzled my warmth
as their lice paddled away on the
salt pulsing of my skin,

leaving the chilling little ships behind. (The Wheel)

In one of his most moving poems, Maureen, Norman Morrissey blends his perception of human and animal to offer a memorable image of life's tenacity in the dying. Dogs had killed "the scrub hare we'd given safe garden all those years":

eyes sharp,
tense with some last patience

dragged beyond pain and fear. . . .

Did you wear that look
When the cancer'd had its day?

Then the beautiful elegiac close
on the possibility of life beyond
suffering:

In the old story,
Hare brought tidings from the
Moon
of immortality:

as she lay with her eyes so quick
and her flesh so wracked

did she have news for me?

That tenderly ambivalent enquiry is but one example of the pleasure to be had in reading this subtle, humane and witty collection from a poet deeply "versed in country things".

Dog Latin will be launched at Reddit's on Friday, October 6, 6pm for 6.30pm.