

Wilderness House Literary Review 10/4

Natural Histories by Mark Pawlak
Cervena Barva Press, Somerville, MA
34 pages, softbound, \$7

Review by Zvi A. Sesling

About two years ago in a review of Mark Pawlak's *Go to the Pine: Quoddy Journals 2005-2010* I wrote that, "Pawlak's poems are more than just poems, they are paintings, a verbal presentation of what an artist would perceive...."

In his latest chapbook of poetry Pawlak again returns to paintings and nature that puts

him on a par with the best of poets who write about these subjects, particularly nature, which include Gary Snyder and Taylor Graham. This is not to say that he imitates anyone, he certainly does not. Pawlak has a keen eye with an acute sensitivity of what nature is really about and he can relate his observations in short, clear verse.

The first part of the books is done in panels, as in the panels of paintings common among the Japanese, Chinese and some Orthodox paintings. The first part of the chapbook is titled "After Utamaro's Chorus of Birds and Insects" and portrays in words 11 panels.

In "Panel 1" for instance, he presents a six line view of a field of grass as an ocean that when closing one's eyes presents a clear image that to some readers would seem to be ocean waves:

*Undulating green sea
of weeds and tall grasses,*

*bordering train tracks,
with flecks of white foam –*

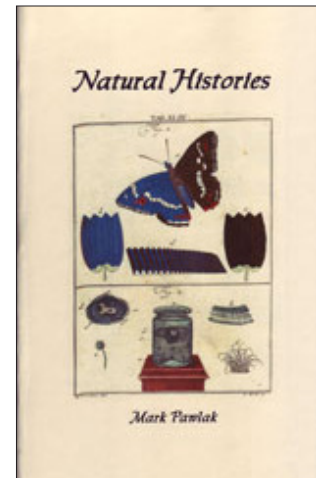
*Queen Ann's Lace –
at the wave crests*

In Panel 5 the animal world seen as the precursor to the battle soon to be joined and the reader can feel the tenseness and twitching that precedes that engagement:

*Ink-black thumb smudges
on otherwise white fur,*

*this crouching cat,
muscles tensed,*

*balanced atop
chain-link fence*



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*face-to-face with
gray squirrel, its tail erect –*

*two trains on a collision course –
fur soon to fly.*

Pawlak has an unerring eye for detail, even the most minute ones he sees the carpet of bluebells, spread/beneath forsythia's golden crown (Panel 6) or Ancient backyard cedar,/whose tippy-top tickles the clouds (Panel) and finally underwings showing to advantage/the concentric bands (Panel 10) The sequence "Admonitions" is written in eight sections and begins as follows:

1.

*You stand on the pedestrian median between lanes of traffic,
waiting for the walk light,*

*gazing down to where rain has washed up
winged seeds, flotsam of sodden leaf-litter,*

*the butt ends of cigarettes, crushed under heels...
paying no mind to the Chicory sprout*

*that has put on just for you,
this display of pinwheel petals*

*under an echoing blue sky,
with not a single cloud in sight.*

Here again Pawlak has brought the reality of life to a scene. You can picture it – all of it – as if you are there, as if you are waiting for the walk light, looking at the washed up seeds and cigarette butts. It is what makes Pawlak's poetry often magical to read as in his haiku like poems in Natural Histories:

*Fly on windowsill
wringing its hands –
are fly worries
fly-sized*

Ah, Pawlak also has a sense of humor as the next poem also shows:

*Windfall apples and overripe grapes
litter my patio;
drunken wasps
stagger amid the bounty.*

Each of the poems in Natural Histories takes on views of the natural world be it a fly or wasps, cats, snails, dragonfly or even an insignificant ant that suddenly does not seem insignificant.

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Two other sections – “Cupid’s Dart” and “Audubon Calendar Pages” close out the book and I particularly enjoyed the latter in which each month has a four line poem of which I have selected two:

February

*Retracing my steps
after putting out trash in a snow squall
my footprints
have already vanished.*

October

*Hiking in this grove
of towering white pines
planted in another century,
my posture has improved.*

I have enjoyed Pawlak’s poetry for long time and in fact have published him in Muddy River Poetry Review as a feature. I suggest to readers they spend time with his poetry not only for entertainment but also to learn about writing poetry that engages, teaches and in the end leaves readers satisfied.

Zvi A. Sesling

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