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Niche by Basma Kavanagh

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**Catching more than a Glimpse: a review of
*Niche***

***Niche* by BASMA KAVANAGH**

Frontenac House Press, 2016 \$15.95

Reviewed by **VIVIAN HANSEN**

This collection of haunting poems entreats the environmental eye to revision the natural world. This revisioning is contained in poems that point cross-hairs at the scientific method, artifact collections, and the sense of appropriation that we pull into place when exploring wilderness. In "How to Catch a Glimpse," Kavanagh defamiliarizes the concept of the science project:

Glimpses are shy and secretive.
They are also very small, and
generally only active (seasonally)
at dawn and dusk. For these
reasons, glimpses can be very
hard to catch. However, with
practiced dedication, and proper
tools, it is possible to collect and
learn more about these delicate
and elusive creatures....*What
you will need: a sweeping net/an
umbrella/a beating cloth/glass-
bottomed pill-boxes
....lantern/sugaring
mixture/funnel/collecting bag.*
(49)

I use the word haunting because the sense of the collection has emerged from what any of us think we know about science and the natural world. The haunting of nature also includes one's experiences in catching a glimpse of something rare and olfactory meanings that are conjured in the memories of a wild child. These are primal

sites where Kavanagh goes to play with her revisions. The book contains eleven images of artifacts pulled from the photographic trays of a dusty museum and one of a man trying to catch butterflies. This display is unusual for a poetry book but allows us to peruse an old familiar framework of "other" in a fusion of language and vision.

The book uses a subtle, but demanding second person voice as a hailing frequency to readers and wilderness observers. In "Red Knot Dreamer" you become blissfully "other:"

Your chest hurts and you feel
hungry. Winds sweep over your
speckled heart, perched on its
rocky ledge. Waves scour your
heart. Every morning you walk
your little cove. (53)

In "Two Sighs for Sale," the sense of living in the wilderness past becomes salient for what can never be again:

The first is nearly one hundred and
forty years old...Sigh is in original
cobalt container, stopper showing
some discoloration, sign itself has
deteriorated slightly. Asking one
hundred dollars. (54)

A hard but necessary observation from the poet is her innate knowledge that "[t]here are things in there we didn't know were missing" (59). Like a scientist, she can only examine the empirical evidence of what is before her and know that something is missing, and continues to miss, the human eye:

It is very hard to see, so hard to
keep a tally, like keeping track of
your senses while falling. Everything

drifts in and out of focus, in and out of earshot, or comprehension – jumbled, whispery, feverish. (59)

Kavanagh conjures the full range of poetic sensibility to call attention to glimpses and ghosts of a world falling into extinction. In “Blanding’s Turtle,” the anthropomorphic touch, which is no longer in eco-sensibility vogue, still manages to invoke sympathies and fuse boundaries between human and animal:

When the scent of evening changes, and the cool air carries its tinge of leaves turning, the lilt of cricketsong, a hum of overripe berries, we tilt towards *that* place. We amble easily northwest, back from small ponds and wet ditches, the bogs and ferns, the logs and long rocks where we sunned ourselves all summer. (69)

The poetic swerve in *Niche* is the setup of compare/contrast discourse. This style supports the collection of poems as essay. Each lyrical surprise is one that catches a primal memory and releases it into collective perception. In “Self-Loathing: a dissection,” we are permitted an Asimov-like view into the soft tissue of human form:

Take note of the severely shrunken myth organs, the atrophied animal-language lobe. Notice the over-

abundance of doubt in the brain tissue, the extreme viscosity of loneliness coating the meninges. (82)

To be offered such an exposé drives one into the effort of how to reconstitute the animal-language cerebral lobe. Kavanagh offers us a remedy:

Spend time listening / in a language you don’t speak, *river otter, nuthatch, boblink*. Keep / your eyes and ears peeled. / Peel a green alder branch, or a hazel. Witch water, walk without a map, do what the land tells you. (89)

Citations describing what is lost are a ghostly, veiled sadness in this book. Kavanagh expresses the sadness and the eco-warrior dynamic in this marvelous collection. This is no small feat, and permits us a space to explicate what we think we know about extinction of species, including our own. In the final poem sequence of the book’s title *Niche*, Kavanagh focuses on recovery and renewal. “Inhale your enemy’s suffering. Inhale your friend’s. Transform the weight of the world with your breath” (97). In the perfect act of living in a dying world, we can still catch glimpses.

VIVIAN HANSEN is a Calgary poet and creative nonfiction writer.