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Faith, Doubt and Paradox

Believing is not the same as Being Saved by

LISA MARTIN

University of Alberta Press, 2017 \$19.95

Reviewed by GILLIAN HARDING-RUSSELL

Lisa Martin's *Believing is not the same as Being Saved* is an intricate collection of poems that meditates on pivotal traumatic events in the speaker's life that challenge her faith. With the highest number in the universe equal to infinity plus one, and this unfathomable concept to be arrived at by using numbers one to nine, the speaker learns that the world must be built from what we know (5). Here is an experiential verse that is also curiously philosophical in its inquiry. Although grounded in real experience and the natural world, the contexts within a single poem may shift ground from scene to related scene as they follow an idea. Moreover, there is an interconnectedness among poems and the ideas that proceed from them that holds the web of her vision together. In language that turns in and out of itself in finely tuned poetic phrasing, Martin deftly manages a vision that embraces death and loss as the other side of life and love and what matters most to us.

The title poem "Believing is not the same as being saved" comes unconventionally first in the collection, rather than nearer the three-quarter point or climax of the collection. Here Martin brings alive a personally impelled philosophical quandary as inspired after a tragic scene when a young girl at the church camp falls from a high rock and is rescued by "the tanned / shirtless boys' counsellor" (10) who is a teenager himself. After reaching her inert body and picking her up,

he continues to run but the reason for his running has changed:

He ran, even then
though what compelled him had
altered, though his
muscles changed, became the
animal necessity
we need to get through. (17-20)

As the speaker remembers, she had mentally "flicked off a switch" that summer since she had wanted to "understand darkness," and from her earlier comment about the girl, "*is this what you really want?*" (8), the reader may surmise that the speaker implicates her own somewhat willful despair and thoughts of suicide.

While inspired by real experience—concrete situations and their impact on a vulnerable speaker—the poems in this collection do not ordinarily confine the treatment of an event to a single poem but instead tend to spread the inquiry over several poems and to shape the particular poem around that evolving spiritual experience. For instance, in dealing with her mother's sickness and death, Martin edges warily towards the subject, in "Learning to speak and not to speak," when she remarks on how her own daughter looks like her mother when she was dying: "her cheeks full of brown fat that keeps life viable" (8). And then she comments on the paradox of "how close everything in the universe is to its extreme" (9):

What slips away when pain comes?
Isn't it words that leave us first
—the right ones— whatever
likely story once made us
intelligible to ourselves. (20-24)

In the following poem, “Things I can and cannot do,” also relating to her mother’s death, the speaker remarks on the wisdom that her mother has taught her, that “anything upended becomes / its opposite, that death is not the end of us” (9-10). She concludes, “I cannot bring you back from the dead” (11-12): the sand on the beach where she stands with her daughter has returned to “formlessness”:

but I have collected the necessary
materials
built my castle on the sand. What is
left holds the shape of the
container. (12-16)

Accordingly memory of what is lost is retained through its absence and what previously surrounded its presence in the material world.

In the next poem, “Preserve of the useful,” we see how the speaker’s memory of her mother is kept alive by her yellow bowl that she fills with red apples:

That’s trust before it’s broken—
objects persist
through time, the bowl is unbroken,
the tree will not be cut down. (16-
18)

Similarly, poems form clusters and build on each other elsewhere in the collection. In “Elegy,” about a loved one’s death, the speaker muses that “regret is homeopathic / contemplation, a search for nettles in which / to roll naked” (39-42), and then asks herself “Did I / look closely enough while // what I wanted was still offered?” (42-45). Poignant in her choice of images is her remembering the absence of a white-throated sparrow that whole summer of dying while she invokes the image of a vireo “on a red-eye / flight” and “sunrise”

(64-65) to represent the glory of what has passed. She concludes the poem with verses reminiscent of Kiergaard’s “fear and trembling” in the face of Isaac’s preparing himself to sacrifice his son to God:

And still—
Do you take this?
Yes I do.
All the trembling
beauty too. (67-71)

Also on the theme of death and a testing of faith, the poem “Ecstasis,” on her father’s death, focuses on the teeter-totter of emotion, with a low of despair and an unexpected high of relief that veers towards ecstasy. From an introductory “I was a bit of a holy child” (1), the speaker admits that she was so inspired by her father with his “mischief and goodness” (16) that she, herself, might have become a preacher too; however, she arrives at true faith through doubt, the wisdom evolving from the ordeal of her father’s terminal sickness and death. Thus, she comes to realize how God and love may be “powerless and terminal” and how she reaches “to faith: by way of desperation” (53-55). From her pleading, “*Please, / God, do not let him die,*” the speaker with self-searching comes to the realisation with all its emotional logic that she must have “equivocated,” that she had wanted “pain to end” (58-59):

So the live wire buried
in me came loose and I am
holding it still, ecstatic with
grief[.] (101-104)

With poems that carry a religious and philosophic fervour—whose parallel in literary tradition might be Gerard Manley Hopkins with his rapturous sonnets that

delve into his own faith and doubt about God – Martin’s verses are embedded with incandescent images from the natural world and are sinuous with thought riddled with paradox.

gillian harding-russell is a freelance writer, reviewer and editor working for a number of magazines, among them *Event’s* Manuscript Reading Service. She received an MA in English Literature from McGill and a Ph.D. in Canadian Literature from the University of Saskatchewan. She has three poetry collections and five chapbooks published. In 2016, "Making Sense" was chosen as best suite in *Exile’s* Gwendolyn MacEwen chapbook competition. Poems have recently come out in *Grain*, *Arc*, *The Nashwaak Review*, and are forthcoming in *The Windsor Review* and *Transition Magazine*.