

Crocodiles
Poems by Martha Boss
BOSSPRESS
22 Pages
Price: negotiable



Review by Dennis Daly

Even the title of this enchanted canvas-covered chapbook by Martha Boss comes alive with unruly brashness. The second “c” in Crocodiles has moved over and embraced the second “o” creating what looks like a rebellious liaison that bubbles forward into the book proper. Retro typos like this happen in the alternative production universe of the Hermes Rocket typewriter, circa 1987, used by Boss to manually type out each finished and unique page.

Big subjects like war and peace Boss delves into with gonzo gusto. In her opening poem, Domestic War Declaration, she internalizes the struggle for poetic expression in biological terms. The poet makes contradictory points in an ever contrasting, yet surprisingly sophisticated, context,

*i want that tissue of
inspiration.
i don't want holy crap
occupying my forever
terroristic globe
my cerebrum my lobes my
hemispheres my cranium of wars.*

*i want peace for my faculties.
peace. after trillions of
cells have clashed &
collapsed.
then i want them to get up
& start trouble all over again.*

Many of Boss' poems begin with homespun observations, lulling the reader with over simplified logic. In the meantime each line adds accoutrements of detail, building into an elegant but wickedly funny metaphor. Boss' piece Bad Poem progresses like that. A black ant crosses a cement walk. The poet stirs in traits of focus and determination and then, with a wink, conjures up her infernal vision. Consider these lines leading to an arms race,

*...black ants with stingers.
these nano batteried pests
could, in the right hands,
& equipped with just
the right insecticide
drive an enemy crazy.
that is, until the enemy
got their own.*

Wilderness House Literary Review 10/3

Crocodiles, the title poem, opens definitively with the poet admitting, "I don't like crocodiles." That may be true but the cover of this chapbook with its geometric designs looks suspiciously crocodilish. As Boss follows the escape saga of a crocodile from the Gaza zoo and its life on the lam, her irrepressible wit takes over and the poem turns political with a vengeance. Boss concludes the piece with some pretty funny lines that do nothing if not clarify,

*in a way
the crocodile
is an enviable creature
pure & simple.*

*malice is not
a forethought
or an afterthought.*

*it likes to
slosh around
in your dirty water
& eat yr pets.*

*& it doesn't say
It did it
For peace.*

Petty bureaucrats beware. Boss has your number. Indeed, in a poem wonderfully titled Uh Oh Here She Comes, the poet nails her subject. Without doubt this is my favorite poem in the collection. The piece begins at the chapbook's center where the staples, hidden by green twine, secure the pages. As the poem's anxious protagonist awaits judgment humbly, an inspector of apartments, sent by the city housing department, checks the closets and the drawers, and exhibits the superior air common to many operatives from the lower rungs of officialdom. Boss details the inspection procedure with humor and consternation, and balances the two perfectly. Here's a bit of the description from the heart of the poem,

*she has her big clip board
& big pen.
she opens & closes & peeps
& peers.
she looks like, & i have
endowed her with, all the
attributes of the chinese
communist police.
she has precise puppet
movements & a very pointy
forefinger.
i have a very funny feeling.*

After hearing that Edvard Munch's painting, The Scream, sold for 130 million dollars, Boss ponders the logic and importance of repressed lan-

Wilderness House Literary Review 10/3

guage in her poem entitled Scream. With just a dash of wit the poet describes the artistic conundrum in words both childlike and profound,

*2 short screams mean just in
case you didn't know it i'm here.
1 medium scream is i'll
probably need you to play with me.
one long scream is no, you're
not doing it right. the block
goes here.*

*some people become expert
at not saying
what should be said.
some become congressmen.*

*how often we are
governed by words
that replaced the sound
that could have been
a famous painting.*

Like most consumers Boss celebrates gadgets that work. Her poem I'm Wearing a New Watch drives home a capitalistic point of personal pride as well as the importance of good maintenance that supports systems which numerous dependents rely on—such as an elevator. Screechy ones just won't do. Got it? Well, I didn't. Boss' persona then takes a left turn while speaking to an elderly couple on an elevator she shares with them and joins them in an ideological collaboration. The poet expresses her doubts and arguably invents a new right for human kind. Boss continues her narration,

*i say" it doesn't sound good."
they both say, "no, not good."*

*the three of us.
all for one.
freedom from being stuck
in what doesn't work .*

*machines
& ideologies.*

*i'm grateful for my
comrades in conscience.*

Did Boss really call them "comrades?" She does sneak up on you with her more serious verses. The poet concludes the same poem this way,

Wilderness House Literary Review 10/3

*they smile.
smiles of wisdom
with age.*

*i smile.
i show them.
my watch,
made in china.*

Boss' poems remind me of the English poet Stevie Smith. Not the style or the formal manner, but the temperament. Both can twist their readers into cognitive pretzels. Boss reads her pieces at low key venues in Cambridge (usually Stone Soup) and Somerville. Her self-constructed books (now collectors' items) she stashes away unless asked. Do ask. You'll thank yourself later.