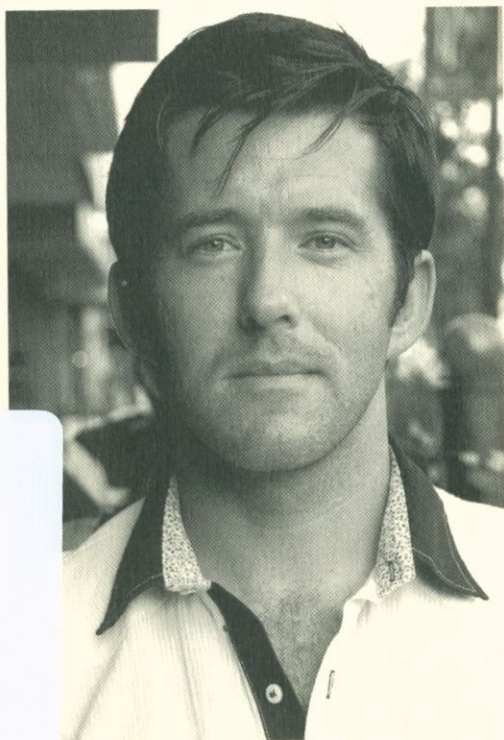


Garth Martens

PROLOGUE FOR  
THE AGE OF  
CONSEQUENCE



ANANSI



graph © Chelsea Rushton

Garth Martens' writing has appeared in *Poetry Ireland Review*, *Hazlitt*, *This Magazine*, *The Fiddlehead*, *Prism*, *Vallum*, *Grain*, and *The Malahat Review*. In 2011 he won the Bronwen Wallace Award for Emerging Writers. He has worked eight years in large-scale commercial construction. *Prologue for the Age of Consequence* is his first book. He lives in Victoria, British Columbia.

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For my father.

## Prologue

Forget where you were going. The Whitemud, the Yellowhead, air warping from the cranked-down window through the truck, lead you out the tourist district, past tall townhouses, their vinyl yellows, greens, blues, stacked as if to keep you out. Through the overpass these give way to the concrete silo, a rail station, canola, wheat. Turn right onto a road that doesn't quite exist. It aims someplace, but won't make it through the mud. Scrapers and bulldozers, straining on caterpillar tread, carve hills at either side, mounds of soil stinking and black. Semi-trucks flank the route, drivers rushing to relieve their freight. Snagged in branches of black poplar and tamarack fronting the road, bag after bag is blown tight, the plastic wrinkled or stretched, mask-like. Cresting wooded slopes, you approach the site and the sun burns, foiling behind black thundercloud, molten like the light of a welder's tool. Nylon camping tents, hundreds along the ditches and clearings, streaked with scum, flare in the gusts. Men who have sailed every fjord or hunted every animal for a little pay have come here now with their many languages. They pack tylenol, meat, razors, coffee, news, migrating from trailers to their tents. Women wait for them, backs to the corrugated siding, smoke trailing from their nostrils. Think ahead to the bonfire at night. The sky that fills with a monument of flies, embered leaves, voices lit with whiskey. It is dark when you reach the excavation and you don't know if the road starts or ends here. If it's abutment, chimera, hole.

## Everything That's Yours

It comes from the highway to the house,  
from the frost on the seeds  
and the station and the dream.

It comes from the bus  
and the strangers in their sleep,  
aspens like wicks in a flame.

It comes from the bird and the bird's chain.

•

It comes from a country singer's voice,  
ashes in the air.

Are they ashes, moths?  
You can't say.

Everything that's yours,  
a jar of receipts, the yellow ceiling,  
a scale that counts your weight.

•

It comes from oil on your plate,  
a streak of gristle you cut  
away and cut and cut.

•

It comes from your son's mute steps  
through the house.

From the neighbour's truck  
and the cuffs of his eyes.  
From the window overnight.

•  
It comes from the purge  
at the sink.

Ceramic tiles, the next drink.

•  
It comes from the chattering needle  
of a sewing machine.

The radio at the prompt.

Does your hand roll in  
like a snailshell? Like a sickle?

•  
It comes from the bath and the candle,  
the woman and the cloth,  
steam as it curls from her skin.

It comes before a question.

Are her eyes made up  
or what?

Is it you we're talking about?

It comes from someone else's hand,  
the drugs that let her sleep,  
just go to sleep.



•

It comes from the understory of a ring,  
the name on a knife,  
from the horse in the yard and the horse before light.

Is it a tool for digging? A freewheeling hinge?

It comes from God in the oven,  
panic in the sky.

•

It comes from the horse asking, When?  
From spokes of a wheel, cigarette filters,  
your son or the window asking.

It doesn't come from you,  
it can never come from you,  
the trees are burning  
and the other hand, reluctantly,  
takes the weight.



## Inheritance

### i.

The motor-oil seep of it. The sawdust sheen.  
That first forage of his father's garage.

Plucked from a pocket, his toy soldier  
sniped among the drill-bits,  
swiped across horizons from a knot-hole.

He took a slim serrated thing in hand.  
Drop that! His father  
caught his wrist. The blade clattered.

### ii.

He didn't shout again. It unnerved him,  
how the boy shook silently.

He struck apart the old wood crate,  
stays cracking on concrete.  
Most landed near his feet. His boy  
stole what he could, hid it behind the shed.

### iii.

The boy dragged out the great river with a twig.  
Erected a gaunt fortress of root, mud, and splintered stave.  
Named it Belle Rive after his father's.

---

Aspens withered upright along the bank.  
The water's transit cut the soil as it rose  
sopping the base so it crumbled.

He could hear the hammer's hook, its reach and wrench.  
The crate caved inward with each blow.

iv.

Before the tower sank within itself,  
ebbing in the gorged river, he pressed  
a toy figure where the earth was soft,  
buried it with a fingertip, closed it under dark.

## Inheritance II

The boy swept dust for a dollar.  
The Boss's son,  
he wanted to please,  
captured insects from the heap  
leggy in the choleric particulate air.

The boy was short at seven  
but mercurial  
clever in boyhood.  
He tried for the  
height of a door-frame,  
the broken hang of a bulb.  
Quick form of any  
vessel he was tipped into,  
garbage can, basement, closet,  
his mother's burrwood box.

At lunch Big Iain brought an iced espresso.  
The boy said, Let me.  
He shot it back in his throat.  
The men applauded.  
So the boy was loud.  
He fingered their tools,  
he dropped them.  
He threw a plastic lid at Iain's head.  
The men said, Dampen down.  
But no. He borrowed pride.  
He echoed slurs.  
He could not be quiet.  
The men said, Still. Be still.  
He could not.

He cupped a seventh  
grasslegger in a glass.

Men, insect, each like that schoolyard trick  
of the paper clip, an elastic,  
wound in a card.

Nervy jumpers enveloped in a jar.

He tried to please,  
to twist his knees or fly  
four ways or eat a bit of moth  
but it was not or never,  
it was not enough.

He shook the jar, he quaked it.  
A punch for a dollar.  
A thrust for a laugh.  
He reached. Boy, he reached.  
Rattled or shook,  
so each disfigurement,  
sampled in glass,  
was simple and settled  
and quiet, a carapace of dust.

## Reclamation

Flies dart over the broad back of the corpse,  
wrestling among hairs and crawling the stilled eyes.  
They'd found it at the reservoir under partial light,  
the unplumbable mire a clot of scum, splayed insects,  
catkins from a near alder, an ochre float of willow leaves.  
Their old dog hanging in telluric shallows.  
Probably he'd lost his legs, straining til his heart gave out.  
Maybe he'd gone on purpose with an unforgiving thirst.

Underwater the rust-red hairs swam ethereal  
and fine as silk. Free, at last, of gravity.  
His father hoisted the forelegs and he, the hind.  
They brought the body to the air  
where the water broke. The hind paws  
cold and stiff as the knobby hilts of a wheelbarrow.

Now they smack stones with their spades,  
upheel an ancient complication in clay.  
Black flies, mosquitoes graze their ears, a mist  
slender as a small death between the birch,  
a surrounding sway of mute-white boughs.

The two men cut a stark space, attacking,  
between the shovels, a lacrimal till.  
Breaths were broken out. A matt  
of root that met the pointed drive. The steep  
assault of scent like brooding tea: a slant  
of clubmoss, clouded pancreatic crawl  
unbolted in the wane. Their dog,  
a blanked, compromising slate.

---

His father rears up from the work  
to daub his face. In the crooked light  
he looks as if he's making strange signs,  
like he did at the Rutland ball diamond,  
signage the son was never sure of.  
Both are backed with a shadowy  
braid: it funnels from their feet,  
a shrunken, whispery connivance of flies  
that rakes apart the dog, a wasp  
that scales the retracted tongue, the good teeth.

An after-breath in the gapped. A droning  
reek, a drowning. The drill of muskeg  
makes them tighten as they loosen  
earth, a plot they scrutinize  
between the planted spades—  
aspen, fireweed, auricular in the dusk—  
before they swing the carcass across the dark.

Under wet fractals of spruce-light  
where robins sew for worms,  
hued crackle of turf-leaf,  
leaf-shadow, for which his father stops.

## Leathering

He travels north from camp to camp,  
trailers on dunnage, gravel,  
rusted barrels and stacked wood,

tents where men dream cement,  
its consistency, its price,  
the length of its fix.

He forgets his reasons, his debts, his wife,  
works a ditch or drives a spike.  
There is a stone in his wrist.

He craves the cracked-up moon, the lake,  
a place on the mud bank to shout, to drink,  
to fuck under the stars.

He'd like a newer pouch, tools with clean  
teeth, straight lines to gouge  
geometry in peat, a level he can trust.

Mosquitoes have eaten his skin.  
His thumb is black. Clouds  
fatten through the west.

What lasts is law: that axis breaks  
on axis, rain on rain.  
If he could reach, he'd pull  
every twisted star with a hammer.



## Contact

In the digital flash of three a.m.  
at the Best Western, he's awake,  
the ceiling fan, the heat,  
a fibreglass fuse on his skin.  
While Lisa sleeps, both shoulders  
covered, he realizes she's been crying,  
lip gloss on her open mouth,  
eyeshadow a dusted flutter of wings.  
Inside her blouse, her breasts  
heavy to his touch—they're numb,  
both his hands to the wrists.

At eighteen he joined the infantry.  
Near Wainwright, training,  
it was forty below, they were firing shells,  
he shed his gloves to fix the radio  
and lost all feeling. In Afghanistan,  
hills glutted with men triggering  
rounds through the scrub,  
his rifle fuming,  
he forgot the local  
smokes were primed with opium.

He's twenty now and works for his father  
in the north end, every day in harness,  
rising with a skyscraper, half-built.  
He wanted tomorrow off. Yet  
asking his father, he was queasy.  
He couldn't face the old man, so instead  
walked out. What kind of soldier,  
son, he asks himself, runs?

His rage, his lust, is on the other side of his wrists.  
The guy whose chin he smashed, yesterday  
after work, was lumber under steel.  
Women too were pictures he called up,  
overlaid on websites, neon-cheap,  
on the rig-pig in the tight shirt  
whose glance swelled shut before the brawling quit.  
He saw so many women, he liked  
the honest ones, he figured  
it was in their pose, the mouth of course—  
through a filter weather in the eyes.

That's what he saw through the crowd,  
through the sputtering shrapnel of the strobe,  
Lisa under the speakers wearing a red  
blouse with her left shoulder exposed,  
sharp in his circuitry. He was charged  
by the men standing close, everyone's  
desire soldered to his own, the smooth  
open fire of her dancing. He felt  
her up at the bar. He was never  
so bold before his hands went blind.  
She didn't say much, even later,  
his hands sweeping  
her skin, his mouth on her body.

Through the balcony screen, the summer,  
hard-going, carries on. If he were to sleep,  
he might confront his father's  
slipping gaze, years in a company hat,  
hair matted, losing lustre. But,  
who is sleeping, and who,  
now, has been crying?

## Ladybugs

He swats them as they graze his teeth.  
A slow propulsive battery. They veer  
toward his throat or pupil. Frieze  
of pebbles. Float of hail. Disturbed  
heat in susurrations on the fifth floor.  
Spitting out a third, he lifts the rail  
from its u-ring perch and signals Sam,  
the tar-black bastard forking panels  
up or down on a boom. Opal blue.  
Aspen. He pauses at the bright pillar,  
its surfaces unctuous, unbroken, and cool.

Another ladybug beads him in the eye.  
He stumbles. At the edge  
the crew in hardhats, insect-small.  
With a pivot, discrete, vaulted,  
he snags the neat end of the nearest rail,  
two-by-four pinched  
between a gloved thumb and forefinger.  
A too-large glove, its leather  
too worked out in a sheen.  
He fronts his weight. Yearning to  
a distance shaded on the floor.  
*Oh fuck.* Each word—his voice  
is cleated—tapped home  
like the head of a nail.  
His harness, rope,  
are buried on a hook in the sea-can below.

---

Such awfully ordinary laziness, that near fall.  
His pulse freaking out. Yesterday a journeyman  
Buddhist insisted a life may be measured by heartbeats—  
an espresso addict, a centuried monk differing just  
in the pace of the beat or length of breath. So  
he follows a chalk-line of coke,  
heartbeats clipping free like all those dotted ladies,  
hundreds madly honing, horny,  
spuming from trees to the pillar and his body  
where the boom rises or falls as he waits at the edge.  
  
Pulses, lugged through papery skin, discomfited him.  
Not blood, but its arterial wheezing, repulsed him.  
His father's death by cardiac arrest.  
When would his heart attack—that bankrupt  
glutted tempo lobbing every valve?  
Cocaine stinted the heart, but it brought sharpness,  
red wing, black wing, glazed with frost.

## From Cabin Hill

Before the boomtime, they weren't capable of selling  
flyers or flipping  
burgers, let alone roughing it on girders or the rigs.  
Built wrong, they were arsonists, soothsayers, detox drifters.  
Like Danny, who muttered to himself and drew on outhouse walls  
his co-workers, whose faces were mashed through  
by a hammer. When he caught me eyeing him  
he made the devil's hand and flashed his large lesioned tongue.  
I hauled a sixteen-footer from the grass, vexed with mosquitoes,  
grunted as I jacked it vertically so he could reach. He swayed  
on his end, leaden, blinking, fucked in the shop.  
Of course the Boss ignored this, bought some tearjerk tale,  
how as a single father, fending off an ex-wife in court,  
Danny was burping a baby all night, every night.  
It could have been true, he'd sleep at lunch face planted to the table.

Or the Acid Hippie, hair past his ears, who in the west corridor  
installed drywall with a stereo so loud you heard the hissing  
strings of Zeppelin, Floyd, or Hendrix through the duct  
twenty-six stories down, when you cupped your ear to the grill.  
His last job, in Newfoundland, he scalped as a carnie  
for a migrant fair, until, the story goes, there was an unborn son.  
Deaf to traffic, he slept in a small tent floored with pelts,  
hemp fabric pegged by the highway, obscured in thickets.  
His wristwatch showed the hour, not the minute. Often late,  
he stayed late, climbed the chain-link after lock-up,  
ears still ringing.

He signed on with us, maybe, because we had electric outlets  
and the Boss in a lapse didn't snip his stereo cord.  
When we had the blackout for a week that winter, electricians



wiring the upper floors, I slouched upstairs for batteries.  
He was gone. His gloves gripped a sheet of gypsum board  
as if he were fried to an airy dust.

Then there was Fat Gunnar, Foreman of the Brickies,  
who bullied other trades, tearing left or right  
without safety goggles, hardhat, or a mask, inhaling  
deeply that abraded shroud of silica.  
Piled with cinder-blocks, his pallets teetered  
at the end of scaffolds. His men  
reached from the highest rung of ladders. Rifled  
through lunches, pocketed drill-bits, boxes of screws.  
Johnny Lightning warned us,  
If you're gonna write him up, you better have balls—  
he'll be ripping around with that goddamned cell-cam.  
I yelled at Gunnar, he practically dared me,  
bareheaded under a crew stripping a ceiling.  
Spotted him after in front of the Boss, hardhat in place.  
Lookie, I said, you found it. He roared, Who the hell're you?  
General contractor, I said, staring. Nah, he spat,  
You're just a fucking monkey! He busted me that afternoon  
past the painted line without a harness.  
Snapped eleven pictures, leveraged every angle.  
But he got his. He'd ribbed a guy for days,  
an older, lightweight Ethiopian  
known for his workday hustle and few words.  
You know what this is? Gunnar said, pinching a penny  
under the guy's nose—An Ethiopian stranglehold!  
That same punchy laugh. Then the old man  
grabbed Gunnar by the neck and threw him to the ground.  
Took four athletic brickies to pry those fingers from his throat.  
The rest of the day, Gunnar mixed mortar in a daze.

---

Adam was a wannabe whitehat, cozying the Foreman, Lead Hand,  
his beak so far up their asses we wouldn't know  
who spoke if it weren't for his bright orange shirt and yellow stripes.  
We called him Big Bird. Even that Bible-thumper  
couldn't bear the roundabout way Adam spied  
or his gab about work when all we wanted was quiet.  
If we lingered, after lunch, he stood at the door,  
clapped and rubbed his hands, faking the laid-back angle—  
Ready to get at her?—underbitten lisp and flexed grin.  
Bible-thumper dropped his paper—Are you signing  
the cheques, boy?—and as Adam stamped off—  
There ain't no better word for that kid than *princess*.  
He talked and talked about his three-hundred-dollar hammer.  
Johnny'd laugh—Now if you knew how to swing it.  
He told the grossest stories, how he once hired a woman  
for ten dollars, and she was so dry, he hawked a loogie  
to lube the action. Another was so obsessed he feared  
she'd scoop his sperm from used condoms and impregnate herself.  
The more he tried to impress, the more we hated him.  
Cutting trim as I passed, his rat eye swivelling,  
he said, Damn it, then dropped a disposable blade to the concrete.  
Running his knife toward himself he had slit  
through his thumb, blood hopping from the artery.  
He rushed away. I followed the splats  
outside, where they diluted in the mud. In the First Aid room  
he wrapped paper towel around his thumb  
and pulled his shirt up over his head, pale as a worm.  
We agreed, later, we'd never liked him better.

The Albanians, wary in the manner of brothers who are hunted,  
crossed a cattlegate to the site, hoodies drawn, in wet July.



They were boys in Kosovo when their mother  
was shot on the street. The eldest,  
Kreshnik, was a trained cage fighter. Wore sunglasses,  
was silent. I could never tell, when he piled  
beams incorrectly or retrieved a chain we didn't need,  
if he misunderstood, or if, in his cunning,  
he meant to goad me. His brother,  
Avni, would explain Kreshnik as we stripped  
forms of a lower floor. He was the only one  
unafraid of the Foreman, who, confused himself,  
smiled when Avni asked, Why do they call you  
Johnny Lightning? The Foreman turned away, then  
spun around, fist and forearm clenched, Pow!  
I am the flash before the thunder! He rolled his sleeve,  
the sundered storm clouds a wrinkled tattoo beneath his shoulder,  
and the young Albanian beaming. Later that summer  
the brothers pinned the carpenter from Iraq in the basement. He'd  
corrected their efforts too often, and now,  
sent for u-heads on a pallet, they lowered his face  
to the water, a foot in depth and mired with larvae. Avni  
whispered in his ear, You don't give us orders, you dirty Iraqi,  
and after making him beg, they let him go,  
packed their gear and crossed the cattlegate one last time.

Tyrrel, or Tyrone, we were never sure which,  
the Slavic engineer who oversaw oil refineries  
before the Soviets withdrew from Georgia.  
He took a shine to me, I can't say why,  
I'm fair, maybe, I spoke up for him at break,  
others chewing on how slow he was, how slothfully  
he pulled nails from lumber, collected them like tokens.  
Did anyone else, as I did, know how much metal he  
hoarded in lidded buckets behind a stand of aspen,

severed ends of rod, angle-iron, slips of tin,  
wrangled bundles of tie-wire?  
Tyrrel had this habit of touching. As we met  
to wind cord or pile sheets of fibreboard,  
he'd ask what types of wine I liked, where did I go  
for a dance, what did this city offer, resting  
the upper portion of his hand on my elbow or waist  
or draping his arm over my shoulder.  
All I do is work, I told him, I don't know anything,  
and reared back, nervous, scuffing my boot in the dirt.  
The crew, dog-like, sunk its teeth variously.  
Late that summer, his last shift, five of us carried posts,  
shook out panels, set them to form,  
shoring for the concrete pour on Monday.  
We ran into a problem, arguing then  
how we'd set the row over the guardrail.  
Tyrrel stood in the midst of us, square jaw  
floured with stubble, high cheeks lightly  
tanned. Listening for a solution  
they stopped, closed in.  
Blue horses, he said, his English still imperfect,  
when you call them in, they like apples. His thick lips  
puckered, smacking, his hand extended,  
he must have done this in the apple valley  
with his brothers—we were staring—  
his fingers brushing together—he stopped us  
short—as if he were gauging  
a fabric for his sister's dress  
or rubbing the bracts of a grain, calling us,  
horses, men, to the sweetness in his palm.

He tried to get it right, or at least tried to falsify rightness.  
Under the stippled  
ceiling within the drywall's whiteness.

His boots gristing at a pebble  
he flushed each cabinet, bunted with a ball-peen,  
shimming to a hair's width.

**Garth Martens' debut**, *Prologue for the Age of Consequence*, is about the tar sands and industrial projects of Alberta, and the men who work in them. But to describe it as such restricts the book to its physical concerns, when in fact these are poems of great philosophical ambition, and startling ethical and psychological reach.

Martens has made an elemental world both beautiful and severe, and on his stage, characters assume a collective status both emphatically human and radically mythic. He is interested in endurance, in addition, loss, abuse, and pain, in how people are created, and how they create *themselves*, out of crude material both inherited, and scavenged. His language is rough and baroque; his metaphors are titanic in their range and scope. This is a book about grace and error, about hurtling towards the unknown, about acting out. Martens writes: "It is dark when you reach the excavation and you don't know if the road starts or ends here. If it's abutment, chimera, hole." *Prologue for the Age of Consequence* accrues the propulsive force of an epic. It will pry you open, and reorder what it finds inside.

"Of the various marvels in Garth Martens' *Prologue for the Age of Consequence*, the ones that strike me most are the powerful and original language, the stirringly concrete grappling with technological-industrial reality, and the approach through work life as lived today. His is poetry that embraces the harshest facts, then spirals through meditation and lyricism to a vision of our world from the towers of Troy to the towers of the oil derricks, set in their present-day 'microwavable / avatar country of the digital.' [A]n exceptional book." — **A. F. Moritz**

"*Prologue for the Age of Consequence* speaks a demotic blurt, Woody Guthrie, early Dylan rough, consonants thunking like nail guns. And in the marvelous din, towers, ziggurats of the oil boom, rise, mammoth, purposeful and unhuman. Martens gives us the men who erect them in Fort Mac or somewhere east of High Prairie . . . The book is as character-crammed as the *Inferno*." — **Tim Lilburn**



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