*The Fears* by Kevin Prufer rev. by Joseph Reyes

Copper Canyon

Kevin Prufer is a writer of poetry and fiction, an editor, and a publisher. A Creative Writing professor at the University of Houston, Prufer has won multiple Pushcart prizes, awards from the Poetry Society of America, and fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Lannan Foundation. He has also collaborated with Wayne Miller and Martin Rock in directing the Unsung Masters Series, a set of books that aims to embellish lesser-known authors to new generations of readers. *The Fears*, published in 2023, is a collection of his poems that carefully examines and discusses the fears of loss, death, obscurity, and the unknown.

A sense of dread permeates throughout *The Fears* to visualize its themes, using wordplay and topics that emulate a nihilistic tone through a retrospective lens. The poems explore, discuss, and emulate feelings of loss and despair as they realize unfortunate truths. One example is the man with a bedridden wife in “The Greek Gods” who realizes the apathy of her nurses but eventually mirrors them. Another is the man in “Election Night” who grows disinterested in his own choices as he sees the folly of two presidential candidates. These stories have a vulnerable, intimate quality to them that amplifies the tonal and emotional impact—of understanding the harsh realities inherent to life, whether they be sensical or nonsensical—in a way that sometimes feels deeply empathetic. In clearer words, the struggles present in these poems can feel quite real to some readers.

But these experiences provide only one aspect of the thematic coin, juxtaposed by other works in the anthology that find meaning in these pessimistic revelations; of seeing the more unfortunate aspects of humanity. These other works instead counter that nihilism with wonder, consideration, and acceptance. One of my favorite poems in the collection, “A Body of Work,” puts readers in the shoes of a man who realizes and fears that the legacy he will leave behind may not be understood by those who come after him. Repetition manifests in the phrases “One comes, eventually” and “For instance,” followed by statements of realization and enlightenment, creating a fascinating tone that seesaws between two heavily conflicting feelings: despair and hope. For example, how the speaker contrasts the belief that his “bodies of work” would become unintelligible with the realization that they can thrive in the “emptiness of deep space,” noting them as “negligible, though they once seemed, in their way, to breathe,” (Prufer 9). The speaker’s journey in this poem into understanding these feelings is gradual in a way that is both visually and narratively appealing. In the titular poem, the verses being terse in nature highlight a thoughtful and inquiring tone that directly addresses the concept of nihilism:

You’re going to vanish, he said quietly to himself, the

sentiment having bubbled up just perfectly, a perfect,

impossible little thought. Yet he knew the world to be an

ordered system…Nothing, he knew, was unpredictable, but

the limits of his data prevented him from knowing. That he

would die was a certainty, but his mind was too small. And

what did it mean, to matter? And why should he have fears? (39)

The speaker is well aware that he shall die in the coming future, but then directly questions such a concept: why must he fear it? What exactly does it mean to live, in that case? These inquiries oppose the apathetic acceptance present in “The Greek Gods” and “Election Night”, creating a juxtaposition that is both inspiring and thought-provoking.

Both of these poems visualize an individual’s growth that stands out against their more cynical peers, giving them thematic and tonal impact to the “Memento Mori” intentions of the collection that give the work as a whole an enlightening feeling when looking back upon its contents in retrospect. The presentation of both aspects of nihilism—the ability and inability to accept the unfortunate realities of life—forms a pseudo narrative across all of the works that is both enjoyable and profound to read through.

The various works of *The Fears* are complex, full of intimacy, passionate, and awe-imposing. They remind their readers of the infallibility of human life, exerting an aura of nihilism and despair offset by hope, curiosity, and acceptance that makes it a thought-provoking journey to read through.