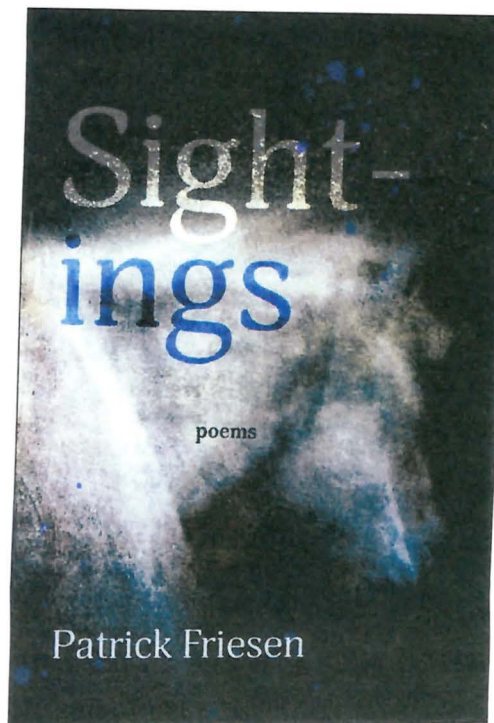




SIGHTINGS

by Patrick Friesen

CMU Press, 2026; 120 pages; \$24.00

Reviewed by Kevin Spent

The cover of Patrick Friesen's latest book of poetry breaks the one word title into parts: Sight/ings, as if signalling the considered particulars inside. For the past fifty years, Friesen's books of poetry have been turning readers into deep-felt thinkers through an ever deepening reach of attention. From his

first book of poetry in 1976 (with one poem opening "in thrall to the roots," and ending with "snake-root"), Canada's most understated post-Mennonite author (poet, playwright, and translator) continues to uproot the ineffable and give it to us straight.

There are three main sections to *Sightings*, with one poem standing as a preface to it all. This first poem attunes us to our other central sense of meaning-making: listening. "I hear you singing / at night your shadow moves / along the wall," runs the first stanza in this short poem that flows through questions and mysteries ("the human voice / empty and / waiting to be filled") and then tonally shifts in its last line to elbows-on-the-table informality: "the song coming to an end / everything coming to an end // well, not everything." This acknowledgment and undercutting of seriousness plays throughout Friesen's collection, but most strikingly in "laughter" where a presumably biographical detail occasions the poem: "only to say I was seventeen, in a pew, / suddenly aware of

absurdity, fables / in the face of the cosmos." The speaker explains how he started laughing in church. (Friesen himself grew up in the strict Mennonite town of Steinbach, Manitoba.) This protestation of laughter preserves "a blessed turbulence in the face / of certitude."

The first section of *Sightings* offers poems focused on attending to the world and the challenges blocking our way. These poems are largely punctuationless apart from a single period at the end. In this flow of language that reflects upon aging, death and the cruelties of the present age (with its "greed for carnage"), what stopped me time and time again in my reading was Friesen's knack for unique phrasings: "hungering into song," "alive in the bewilderment of matter," and "gobs of gossip," to mention a few. In one poem, the speaker proceeds "without a shakespearean vocabulary" and later in the second part of the collection, we read "A simple sentence says what you need. No more complexity coming apart in a sentence diagram." The distinguishing feature of this middle section of prose poems is that a particular topic is focused on (quite often in the title itself: "Squid," "Map," "Boxcars," "Ghosts Don't Sing," etc.), and is then probed essayistically. Sentences themselves are the measurement of thought and heartbeat, and the effect is to produce a voice of experience and humility that, in one poem, asks: "How old do you get to be?" The curiosity of the poems also comes through in the changing pronoun perspectives: I, you, he, and she.

The last section took the most rereads for me to get into (and some Googling to learn more about the references), but whoever said poetry should come without effort. "Homages" presents poems directed and channelling all sorts of figures (Joe Rosenblatt, Anna Akhmatova, Jason Robards Jr., etc.), from sundry cultural forms (literature, cinema, dance, etc). Composed through Friesen's recollections of what these artists have meant to him, these poems had me wondering how memory, as a form of poetic attention, might be the most opaque of qualities and most challenging to bring to bear on the reader in the short span of a poem. Nevertheless, Friesen's craft shines through arrangements, phrasings and his singular diction,

the qualities that stand out from the book overall. The very last poem in "Homages" seems to stand as an entire expression of Friesen's subtly playful tone. Watching the trailer to a young Jason Robards Jr. in *A Thousand Clowns* to understand this poem better, I thought of how we often live so intensely through the artforms around us and here was one of the roots to Friesen's imagination and one of the voices that's filled him and snakes out wondrously onto the wealth of pages he's crafted for us.



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