

Under a Warm Green Linden

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A Review of Todd Davis's *Native Species* — July 24, 2019

by [Lauren Camp](#)

How often do we truly enter into conversation and awareness with what lives and grows around us? Todd Davis writes poems that put aside the noisy commercial world. Most of us understand our place in society by minutes and hours spent being productive at our work, engaging in social events, or with family. But for Davis, the natural world is a clear, true home. These poems honor the biosphere, its truth and urgency: the goat eaten by coyote, the gray fox, tree limb, river.

Davis explores every season and its particulars. He is generous in giving it to us, line by line, poem after poem. In

"Hibernation" he writes, "When we wake, we should ask what walks while we sleep. The bear we saw in the orchard has wedged its body under a rock-slip, slit in the snow to breathe." There is no gap between existing in the woods and reading these poems. It is as if I've been by his side, seeing what he sees, breathing the clean air. His crafted, precise language is a good reminder to know how to name a tree, fish, or bird. A reminder to be still enough to see what's around and an appetite to wonder.

A number of these poems master multiple paths: human and animal. Davis's lines might roll along one way, then turn over to a new thought. It's a steady-handed way to tell connected stories. It works. I was drawn to the rhythmic, luscious play of his language, as "everything refreezing in a slick swatch of darkness." I was lucky to have the chance to read some of Davis's poems aloud for a radio program I hosted on public radio; they sound wonderful in the mouth.

Native Species is scattered throughout with quotes from Tu Fu, Mei Yao Chen, and others, which puts the reader in mind of meditation. Davis reveals everything the environment offers, all vision of place and sound. His capacity to look teaches us to slow down. "Honeysuckle greens and spills in the bottom edges / of the woods, buttery petals slicking the light." I'm there, seeing, breathing.

These poems hold an awareness of the human body, the body of earth, and ongoing thoughts about the afterlife from different perspectives. Memory arrives as sensory image—a whole forest, a meal, the joy of a stream, a lover's body, parental love.

Davis has five previous full-length collections, all of which delve into the green world. But there's something new in this one: a flinching encroachment from society. The environment is warming, changing. As he writes, "We're always at the mercy of the world." This book bends to grieve—habitat, humanity, sustainability. What are we doing to our planet? Davis, a teacher of environmental studies at Pennsylvania State University's Altoona College, is clearly caught in sorrow.

Despite such shifts and losses, Todd Davis makes sure we see the imprint, "the shape of your coming and going / has yet to disappear." This is a book of extreme love for his wife and sons, for our land and waters. This is a book of praise for what is and what is worth saving: "In dark's shelter I place the words / of a prayer upon your tongue. / You are gracious, saying / the prayer back / into my waiting mouth."

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