

Nikki Reimer, *Downverse*. Vancouver: Talonbooks, 2014. Pp.111. Softcover, \$16.95.

nathan dueck, *he'll*. St. John's, Newfoundland: Pedlar Press, 2014.Pp. 94. Softcover, \$20.00.

Something a little different this way comes. Nikki Reimer and nathan dueck bring the tools of deconstruction and postmodernism to their poetic explorations in these critically well-received second poetry collections.

Reimer's book includes photographs, lists, erasures, found poems, and a little experimental typography – prose poems often in blocks of type with large white spaces around them. Reimer tackles subjects such as popular culture, politics, media reporting, grieving, depression, and loss, some poems revolving around the death of her brother Chris, who died in his twenties.

Although much of the collection has an air of melancholy, it is also marked by cynicism and anger. In “as long as you're not doing anything wrong,” a phrase, which usually starts or ends with “you have nothing to worry about,” Reimer subverts the cliché by using 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, and 3<sup>rd</sup> versions to create an evocative long poem about the video-taped deadly tasing of Robert Dziekański arriving at the Vancouver airport in 2007. She returns to the subject in “internet” after having seen the video, while internalizing “this situation” with the use of the word *mental* as a fulcrum to unleash her anger at

“our fine commentarians,” using the word as a label for commentaries that tend to blame the victim.

It is not just established authority that is cut by her sharp insights and her wit. “the big other” challenges the 99%:

This is what comes of the combination of organized art  
for youth and international travel.

We are tired of the 99% of these Occupy Wherever  
that they think they are changing this country.

We would never again be so earnest, youthful,  
privileged and thin.

While repetition, estrangement and heightening language by unorthodox juxtapositions represent what are by now familiar poetic strategies, Reimer also has a good ear. The musicality and rhythm of her phrasing in “without warning the girl cousins” are sensual and dirty, effectively evoking the terrors of puberty, hormones and desire. This musical voice is most devastatingly heard in “living rage,” written for her brother Chris. It concludes: “define a living shell./ the chasm you left behind.”

Like Reimer, nathan dueck lives in Calgary, but his affinities are clearly Manitoba’s East Reserve (the poem’s place names include “Rat River” and “East Village”), where he left the capitalization of his name. Some of his techniques come from a source similar to Reimer’s, with words and letters scattered about the page like hand-thrown seeds, including a *Schmauntfat* recipe, a scene presented as a play, and a sometimes hilarious transcription of a one-sided telephone party-line conversation.

dueck’s enthusiastic play with words is the most fun in translations of *Plaut-dietsch*. It is not necessary for readers to know the language, but it helps, because like most post-modern speakers the narrator is unreliable, as is the translator, even though the book includes a seemingly reliable “Glossary,” ending with a joke translating “dee worscht” as a benediction “Aules haft ein Enj; bloss die Worscht haft twee Enja, ‘Everything has an end; except sausage – it has two ends.’”

While both dueck’s and Reimer’s books use strategies characteristic of postmodernism, the most notable difference between them is that *he’l* is a narrative long poem based on the conceit of a “found manuscript.”<sup>1</sup> We are given the key to the collection in his poem “Leitmotif” near the end of the book: it consists simply of a quotation mark ( ” ) in the middle of the page which illustrates the poet’s poetic distance, notifying readers that

he is quoting the “found” work, while doubling the apostrophe (‘) given its own poem “Cæsura,” and represented by the garter snake on the cover.

These are both ambitious books, a good thing for younger writers, and Mennonite (who are ever so humble) writers, as they draw us into the dying embers of the post-modern 20<sup>th</sup> century. dueck approaches the project more self-consciously than Reimer:

Still, I only comprehend punctuation.

along the line I lost the plot.

a tradition.

Somewhere

I cannot create

I can only invent a new testament.

While dueck is busy deconstructing meaning, Reimer, draws attention to meaning with emotion, surrounded by the noise of popular culture and our dumbed down political world. Both Reimer and dueck are “inventing new testaments,” and it’s about time. *Downverse*, while employing many of the same techniques as dueck (thankfully with fewer puns) as *he’ll*, may be the more engaging of the two, by being, “in the world.”

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### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> The idea of the “found text” goes far back in Canadian writing: *A Strange Manuscript Found in a Copper Cylinder* by James De Milne, a professor at Dalhousie University, was published in book form after his death in 1880.