Al Rempel, *Undiscovered Country*. Salt Spring Island, BC: Mother Tongue Publishing, 2018. Pp. 80. Softcover, $19.95.

The title of Al Rempel's new book of poetry, *Undiscovered Country*, points directly at what lies between the covers. It is taken from that most famous of Shakespeare passages, in which Hamlet reflects on what he describes as "the dread of something after death, the undiscovered country." Rempel's poems are imbued with—perhaps preoccupied with—anxiety, loneliness, death, the unknown in both the natural and interior world, a context in which the collection's moments of luminosity shine all the brighter by contrast. "what is the square footage of my soul?" he asks in the opening poem. "God speaks," he writes in that same piece, "licks his thumb an infinite number of times / and presses the light onto each leaf."

Some of the collection's prevailing darkness surely emanates from its rich sense of place. Rempel resides in Prince George, a city in central northern British Columbia, and his best lines are brilliantly evocative of a largely blue-collar town. "you can almost hear the distant whine," he writes, "chainsaws biting into downed trees, the taste / you hold at the back of your throat." Winter is a constant presence, either coming or going, and it, too, reflects the book's gritty setting. "the road-spray is guzzling off every grill & fender of the vehicles ahead of me," he writes, "as winter sheds its load in snowmelt & sunglare." Boulders, rain, cedars, stars, fog, and snow rise up in these poems like primordial gods, and the entire fourth section of the book, "Once Around the Sun," is a single long poem devoted to the mystery of changing seasons.

While the collection draws much of its tone from its isolated setting, a more personal sense of loneliness is pervasive in the book, as well. "I wish I could say I'm less afraid, now a father," he writes, "but instead my skin has been rubbed thin with living":

> I worry about more things,
> I clutch them tight as I fall through the deep blue
> into the expanse, the universe racing away from me.

Even here, however, Rempel returns to the natural world, concluding his poem with the Zen-like observation that "even the birds are quiet at night." Rempel is a careful writer, and such rich conclusions to his poems, or segments of poems, appear frequently in this book, jolting and rearranging what came before. "this is where we

always start," he promises, "with the formidable, / the unintelligible, with secret mysteries / that stop us short."

Some of the most deeply moving poems, loving recollections of his now-deceased parents, are collected in a section entitled "Before the Infinite." Rempel has clearly enjoyed a warm and embracing upbringing—a welcome counterpoint to present-day tales of familial abuse. He writes to his dying father with warm anticipation, asking "will I cross over, dad / when my turn comes?" And remembering the bruised and worn hands of his mother as "the shape of care," he writes:

> around the warmth of my coffee mug at the kitchen table,
> the hands of my mother – I'm startled
> to see them there.
> Hands that have done all their living & and now lie folded
> under the soil.

The undiscovered country, the impossible incomprehensible universe in which we live: this is Al Rempel's habitat, and the realm to which he invites us in this work. Death, the ultimate undiscovered country, breathes down the poet's neck throughout the book like the "regrets" he memorably describes as the "hooded presence / following me everywhere."

Arguably the best work in this book is the long poem, "Into the Cloud of Unknowing." It takes its title from the fourteenth-century mystical work *The Cloud of Unknowing*, which counsels surrender to that which we do not know in order to commit the soul to God. In Rempel's poem, he is again driving in what seems like Prince George rush hour, through a nearly impenetrable great cloud that has settled upon the landscape. As he does throughout these poems, Rempel once again discovers the "unworldly," if that is the correct word, in the mundane:

> Our valley woke up with fog
> in its mouth, fine strands pulled along
> its length, and a procession of exiles –
> and yes, that's us, going to work.

During his voyage through this cloud of unknowing, Rempel's thoughts wander, as might happen in traffic, to very different places, before searching for connection to his fellow travellers along the way. "where are the people / that never question things," he asks, then wonders: "or do they startle up at night too, / afraid of what they see?" The poem ends with a coming down to earth, once against weaving the interior and the natural world, the profound

and the mundane: "it envelops, / this cloud of unknowing, a bubble of sight / that moves when you move, like a rainbow trick," he writes. "you could be anywhere – / but you're not, you're here."

Al Rempel's *Undiscovered Country*, disturbing, involving, and provocative, speaks with a distinct voice wonderfully free of contemporary literary cliché.

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Karen Enns, *Cloud Physics.* Regina: University of Regina Press, 2017. Pp. 64. Softcover, $19.95.

Karen Enns creates an ominous atmosphere in "Cloud physics," the first poem in her engrossing third poetry collection. We sense we are in another world and another time, recurring motifs in a collection built for rumination. "This is the time of winds from the south / the time of bells, brown cities, smoke and ash." Repeated use of the phrase "this is the time," invokes the wisdom of others who have use the same phrase—Paul Simon, Charles Dickens, and King Solomon in Ecclesiastes among them. But soon, as we read on, we understand instead we are in the world of Jeremiah's Lamentations.

One of the strengths of this short collection is the range it displays. "Epilogue," the next poem, is the longest in the collection, using lines that cover two pages with no stanza breaks. Much as we might expect from a poem placed early in the collection but titled "Epilogue," the poem is disorienting, but also disturbingly beautiful:

> Nothing was questioned
> after the last polar flares broke through
> and silence took over.

Passages like this, as I understand them, read like a chronicle of life at the end of the world, and are offered as lamentations and prophesy of Apocalypse. Her collection uses postmodern strategies of disruption, so readers take notice of her careful choice of language, its bleak beauty, adept and remarkable metaphor, and the handy use of lists like the catalogue of sounds in "Ad Libitum." Enns uses the plural first person a great deal in the collection, as well, not a common choice. There are possibilities of inclusion with the term—"we" is a many gendered pronoun, for example; "we" is