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**Nikki Reimer (2023). *No Town Called We*. Vancouver, BC: Talan Books.
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In her recent book *Disabled Ecologies*, Sunaura Taylor (2024) discusses a commonly-used analogy between disabled bodies, and the canaries famously used to detect poisoned air in coal mines during the Victorian era. Taylor explores how the use of this analogy has previously tended to focus on the toxicities disabled bodies sometimes “detect” in being among the first to be impacted by threats to public health — but she notes that the disability justice movement seeks to “switch the emphasis from the problem being manifested in their bodies to the problem being situated in the response to their bodies” (p. 277). She then poses the question, “How do we work toward a world where there is no coal mine in the first place?” (p. 298) Nikki Reimer, as far as we know, has never compared herself¹ to a canary, but she does identify as a neurodiverse poet managing chronic pain. In the spirit of the former reflection, her collection *No Town Called We* is a wry but often grimly prophetic lamentation of the devastation continually being wrought by late

¹ The author identifies with “she” or “they” pronouns. We are using “she” when referring to her directly and “they” when referring to poems with an obvious speaker.

capitalism, and the decay and willful destruction of the social fabric that connects and protects us in the Anthropocentric era.

No Town Called We opens with the poem “We Wonder If i Will Ever Manage to Write a Poem About Heat Death,” (p.3), a piece highlighting the transformation of scenes of environmental degradation into viral online content. “Koalas in renal failure / foregoing their fear / to lap road from the water were deemed ‘cute’,” writes Reimer, “No, no, said the scientist, not ‘cute.’ / Those creatures are dying.” (lines 9-10). Within this simple passage, Reimer skillfully encapsulates the way that capitalist culture manipulates truth to its own purposes, at once showing us the realities of the destruction wrought by global warming, and yet utterly defanging these realities — so much so that they become little more than mindless content to be scrolled past, and eventually forgotten. Reimer goes on to write that the speaker “asked the cat what comes next / and he said / either the complete transformation of existing relationships / or the heat death of the / planet. One of those.” (lines 15 - 20). This segment both smoothly extends the earlier anecdote about the koalas, as well as addresses what will become a primary theme of the collection: the idea of complete transformation as the only true route to saving ourselves and our planet, as much as this may still be possible. By presenting these two options as a binary choice, this poem serves as neither self-defeating pessimism nor a rallying cry of hope, but perhaps most devastatingly of all, a simple statement of fact.

The word “migraine” appears many times in the collection. An early mention is in a piece called “No Town Called Migraine Glaze” (p. 13). Immediately following a list poem of various apocalyptic absent solidarities (“No more town called Our Town / No Town Called

Good Death / No town called collective safety measures” (lines 19 - 22)), the poem evokes forms of vision brought on by the migraine glaze, a “movement toward scotomo” (line 3) and a “squint [into] plastic fishbowl vision [to] prismatic sightlines” (lines 12-13). With the addition of the concept of neurodiversity, which was unavailable to the 1950s Beat poet, there is a possible allusion to Ferlinghetti’s observation of “the poet’s eye obscenely seeing” (1958 p. 13, line 1). Reimer combines these images with references to agency. She refers to the mythic Baba Yaga (line 7), an ogress who eats children, but who also protects the water of life, and the speaker and her peers “begin[ning] one million throbbing steps to the coliseum / no wait, the Vancouver Public library” (lines 14-15). While we are avoiding spoiling this poem completely, it concludes with a wry death reference. All in all, Reimer may be suggesting the neurodiversity of her frequent migraines makes it harder to be a part of a collective that cheerfully ignores their ongoing dissonance over the worsening state of things. And while a form of bloody-minded and effortful action, perhaps as a result of this vision, is described in the middle of the poem, the later mention of the death of a poem, a project, or even oneself suggests an exhausted and potentially thwarted aspect.

With this particular lens, or set of lenses, Reimer continues to chronicle her observations quite specifically, and is, at turns, despairing, cutting, alarmed, and provoked by what she sees. As mentioned, she singles out late-stage capitalism, environmental destruction, and the erosion of our social fabric, as well as the ongoing impact of colonialism on Turtle Island / Canada. Often, her lens focuses even more tightly on the petroleum industry and its equally toxic politics, an issue of deep concern to the socially-minded in the province of Alberta, but perhaps even more to the poet, whose father, as she

has said, has spent his career in the industry (untitled [performance], *Calgary Poetry Slam*, 2024, July 22). In the ironically titled, “We ♥ [heart icon] Alberta’s Ol Symbolic,” (p. 5) — which may allude to the frequent “We ♥ [heart icon] Oil and Gas” one sees very regularly on bumper stickers and apparel in the author’s city of Calgary, Alberta — the speaker and another “take the elevator to [their] second floor/apartment [and] bust out the biodiesel / firmware use medical-grade plastic/bottles for saline solution,” (lines 1 - 4). The two continually experience distress and guilt over their use of plastic bags when they forget to bring recyclables to the grocery store, observe accelerating urban sprawl all around them, and grapple with the necessity of winter home heating in the Northerly city they reside in. As the city expands, “settler colonialism’s long neoliberal tale [clears] a path for the rules of the patch” at the behest of “Capitalist overlord bosses [and] the dinosaurs that never left us” (lines 30 - 33). In the poem that follows this evocation of extinction, “Oil and Gas Don’t Love We Back” (p. 6), the speaker of the poem continues to accuse themselves of complacency in the system, but also pointedly indicts the “status quo as violence” (line 20). Never mind the endangered natural world — in this collection, even the more nurturing aspects of urban community living, such as an “inner city hospital” (line 25) and “pools” and “fire halls,” (line 28) have become a “clinical sacrifice” (line 30) to expansion. Reimer, despite the misgivings of complicity, often writes of a determination to counter this, at least with poetry. The next poem is a portrayal of the inevitability of the Covid pandemic wreaking more devastation than it might have otherwise, given the social ills she identifies. She concludes not in despair or guilt but, in solidarity with the health care workers vilified

by the anti-vaccine movements and, “Let’s bang posts for nurses, sure, but / show me the way to the machine that kills the fascists” (p. 8, lines 13 - 15).

Working in some contrast to straightforward depictions of agency, *No Town Called We* is also rife with mentions of cats — the aforementioned wise cat in “We Wonder If I Will Ever Manage to Write a Poem About Heat Death” (p. 3) is far from the only appearance of a feline in the collection. Cats make appearances in a variety of different contexts throughout and with a variety of different meanings attached to them. In some poems, cats are simply cats — in “June 2022,” (p. 15) for example, Reimer states that “the cat / dragging his leash around the yard / is no metaphor for self-imposed limitations” (lines 5 - 7), drawing an ironic connection between the cat’s habitual behaviour of dragging around the useless leash with the human beings’ learned complicity with oppressive systems (“i am trying to evict the cop / in my head / i’m trying to arrest the landlord / in my brain”) (*sic*, lines 10 - 12). In other places, the connection between cats and humans is strengthened further, as Reimer both utilises the slang of “cats” to refer to people (“Might we be mid-trilogy cats?”) (p. 53, line 9), but also, at times, seems to use “cat” as a stand-in for the first person (“groceries cost four times what they did ten years ago / the cat is thinking of making a stir-fry”) (lines 14 - 15). From nuanced metaphors to merely picturing the mundane, the usages of cats in *No Town Called We* are diverse and complex; however, the blurring of lines between cats and humans seems well-suited to the book’s overall themes surrounding the effects of late capitalism upon all animals, humans included. The often lethargic, indifferent, and solitary image of the cat is equally effective, serving to

emphasise Reimer's depiction of an exhausted, complicit, and isolated humanity of the Anthropocene.

There are several poems in the collection that evoke the theme of absent or disappearing (or perhaps being made to disappear) solidarities, most obviously the list poem "No Town Called Poetry," and "No Town Called Solidarity" — the latter of which also plays with the word "we," a word that holds a strong presence in the collection despite its stated absence in the title. In general, Reimer uses the word "we" much more often than most poets we've experienced, and in a number of evocative ways. Most frequently, the speaker of a poem addresses the subject of the experiences described within it — as individualised as they may seem at first — as "we". Though it sounds like a royal "we," these uses do not amplify the poet to the status of monarch, but rather suggest — inasmuch as her identity may bring a necessary, if dark, perspective to bear — that there may be many with similar perspectives and experiences. There remains much lamentation of what has been lost socially ("The elders are dead / we've thrown out their tupperware") (lines 15 - 16), but the poignancy and familiarity of so much of what "we" experience quietly renews some of the sense of solidarity — at least in emotional impact, if not in exact details. Illustratively, "The Daily We" (p. 21) identifies the desire for a "new transitional object to click / similar enough to the things we've already clicked to provoke / a feeling of security but different enough to give our brain a fresh / dopamine buzz" . (lines 1-4). The speaker and their partner also sometimes constitute the "we," though much remains so familiar to all of us. In a passage about the partner's ailing father, the speaker describes how "when we conference call, he proudly / tells the nurse he's having a three

way. No one has the heart to / let him know we're huddled here in the space where it stings" (lines 7 - 9). Sometimes, too, the "we" is the villain or antagonist ("capitalism's influencer culture asks, / What you have / can we sell it later") (line 13), but always with some suggestion of the speaker's complicity. The most playful blurring of the speaker as an individual and some collective of address comes in the aforementioned poem "No Town Called Solidarity (p. 11), musing "Let me be the first to post / THANKS WE HATE IT on our tombstones / being good at my job is / a sick game we / play with my self" (lines 11 - 15). And, as dark as the collection gets, the suggested clarity of vision, the sense of agency — wounded as it may be — and the constant outreach of "we", partially counteract the lamentation with some cautious but determined hope.

No Town Called We is a complex but absorbing collection. It feels, at times, that Reimer is reaching out to a "we" that consists of other neurodiverse, tired, and worried people, mutually confirming the validity of our concerns and finding what solace is available in our voices and our community. We would recommend it for connoisseurs of poetry, for anyone who shares her concerns and appreciates their novel expression, for other neurodiverse and world-weary artists — and, of course, for cats.

References

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