Ted (E. F.) Dyck, *Cutthroats and Other Poems*. Winnipeg: Turnstone Press, 2014. Softcover, $10.20.

Victor Enns, *Afghanistan Confessions.* Regina: Hagios Press, 2014. Softcover, $17.95.

Ted Dyck and Victor Enns are writers of Mennonite extraction who have both for many years served the Prairie literary community in various functions. Both are established writers of poetry whose earlier publications (or at least their titles) may have stirred some unrest, whether it be Enns's *Jimmy Bang Poems* (1979) or Dyck's *Pisscat Songs* (1984). Both have worked as editors of important literary journals such as – in Dyck's case, *Grain*, or in Enns's case, the Mennonite literary magazine, *Rhubarb.* Furthermore, Dyck has edited and contributed to several critical volumes on prairie writing.

Whereas Mennonites and Mennonite writers are often seen as serious and devout, only one half of this background comes to bear in these two volumes. Both authors' lives have been severely influenced by depression, about which both are open in their publications and/or websites. While in Dyck's case the remedy might be the return to (writing about) pristine (though threatened) nature in the Rocky Mountains, Enns has chosen a topic that is rather unusual for the pacifist or peace-loving Mennonite community: the war in Afghanistan, Canadian participation in which did not necessarily correspond to the Canadian self-image of peacekeeping.

In his press release concerning the launch of *Cutthroats*, Dyck refers to the volume as "a reinvention of a self besieged by clinical depression" leading to "the author's later emergence as a practi-

tioner and facilitator of writing-for-therapy." Dyck's poems are not only very personal, but they also show his impressive knowledge and command of traditional literary forms. Most of the cutthroat poems in the central part of his collection play with forms of the sonnet. And in fact, Dyck often remains much closer to the traditional sonnet form than other prairie writers such as Robert Kroetsch, whom he mentions as "the most important influence on my writing life" and to whose memory the volume is dedicated.

Dyck's book starts with a meditation entitled "Writing the Cutthroat," in which he elegiacally mourns "the end of the South Ram as you have learned to know it," describes the natural course of nature in which fishing for trout reminds the persona of his own death: "in writing the cutthroat, you have written yourself." The numbered sequence of fifteen "Cutthroat Poems" starts with an elegy entitled "The Fisher." The sonnets play with the expectations the readers may have of traditional Shakespearean or Italian sonnet forms, but they also include allusions to and playful quotations of seventeenth-century metaphysical poets such as Andrew Marvell, of postmodern wordplay or of traditional Christmas carols. "Cutthroat #15," self-ironically subtitled "The Cliché Edge," positions fisher and fish in the perennial repetition of eating and being eaten, fully aware of the overtones of the eucharist:

> When I lift the last morsel to my lips
> I know that as I eat this holy fish
> so too will I be eaten. I drink
> my brandy, my blood.

Other sequences in this volume include the "Ram River Poems" about the pristine, graceful and threatened landscape about which "All the clichés are true," and for the explanation of whose beauty the poet had to invent the "Gods of the River Ram." After the "Bone Creek Blues" playing with geographical and linguistic undecidability, the sequence entitled "Mennomonk, the poem" creates an arguably autobiographical persona presenting an ironic and somewhat cynical worldview recreating and deconstructing the biblical creation myth in a way that is reminiscent of Ted Hughes's *Crow* poems. Very moving poems are included in the section "Moment of Perfection," remembering personal events in the past, or "In Remembrance," in which the persona recalls pivotal points of his family history.

Victor Enns presents a quite different landscape in which the death inflicted is not a consequence of the "fight" of a single fly fisher but rather of weapons of mass destruction. Based on Enns'

personal travels to Afghanistan, this volume presents four different soldiers' views of their exposure to the war in Afghanistan and the traumatic consequences participation in this war has on their personalities. According to their respective personal character and education, these soldiers respond differently to the traumatizing events. The first one, Albert, seems to be well-educated as he muses about being transported to the battle field in an aircraft named Hercules: "I've read Homer. I loved the *Iliad.*" He echoes the beginning of Virgil's *Aeneid* when he claims that "What little forgiveness God brings to me – / I sing." At the same time, he and his fellow soldiers feel lost in the Afghan environment and thus build an archetypally Canadian *inuksuk* at the airfield "without knowing quite what it is, like us / out of place." His intellectualism gives way to frustration and to getting used to shooting at and killing the enemy.

The second soldier, Jimmy – his motivation for signing up being boredom rather than ideological conviction – is also getting used to the techniques of killing and undergoes rites of passage nobody would like to share. The third perspective is that of Sergeant Willis, a more politically astute and "professional" point of view which – after his loss of faith – cannot escape frustration and alienation, feelings which he tries to submerge in whiskey. The fourth section of the volume is entitled "Jolene," and here a soldier thinks about the wife he had to leave back in Canada, but also, the war situation being as horrible as it is, about the female soldiers fighting together with him and about the attraction he might feel to other, also Afghan women.

Enns describes the feelings of these men fighting in a country far away from Canada, but he does not condemn them from a simplistic or facile pacifist position, however much one might be willing and tempted to share it as a reader. He tries to understand the soldiers' motivation and needs, and his engagement in this type of work is appreciatively commented on by an Afghanistan veteran, Neil Maclean, in his afterword in which he states that "Victor Enns' writing impressed me; it was artistic but didn't possess the naivety that I had been seeing up to this point from artists without a military background. I felt it was important that his work reflect the real passion soldiers have, that it broke through the stereotypes people hold… ."

Enns's volume does not show as much of his own personality as his earlier volumes do, but it certainly offers shocking and moving insights into what goes on in other parts of the global village that are not that far away from Canada after all. Also, in these poems he is not interested in poetic structure as much as Ted Dyck in

Cutthroats is fascinated with traditional forms that he uses to represent the fragility of (human) nature. These poetry volumes by two of the leading Mennonite poets in Canada show quite different but equally moving textual and literary approaches ranging from modern takes on Shakespearean sonnets and questions of disappearing natural beauty to free verse reactions to the threats against humanity characterizing our age.

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