

“Take my lie in your arms”

Real Phonies and Genuine Fakes: New poems by Nicky Beer

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Nicky Beer announces the theme of her newest collection of poems in and with its title, *Real Phonies and Genuine Fakes* (2022). The book is “focused on interrogating our human dependence on illusions,” she told the newsletter *Shelf Awareness*. This nod to Nietzsche is not the most promising sign. Beer may “depend” on illusions, but she should not speak for the rest of us.

Among the poems’ colorful subjects are drag queens, actors, forgers, magicians and taxidermy exhibits that are not what they seem to be. But alongside, and sometimes within, these seemingly lighthearted poems are recurring images of destruction and death. Is the poet’s stated theme a cover for another, hidden theme?

Beer is originally from Northport, New York, on the north shore of Long Island. She now works as an associate professor at the University of Colorado Denver, where she also is the poetry editor for the literary journal *Copper Nickel*. Her previous collections are *The Octopus Game* (2015) and *The Diminishing House* (2010). Beer was awarded a fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts, and her poems have appeared in publications such as the *New Yorker* and *Kenyon Review*.

Several poems make reference to gay icons such as David Bowie and Marlene Dietrich. Beer evokes these celebrities as part of her examination of illusion and artifice. For example, the opening poem “Drag Day at Dollywood” describes a crowd of drag queens dressed as Dolly Parton on an outing at the titular theme park. Although the poem is amusing, it does not delve below the surface of its subject. Beer does not venture an explanation for the drag queens’ idolization of Parton (nor the phenomenon of Dollywood itself); she seems

content simply to enjoy the spectacle.

Poems about other types of illusions have similar weaknesses. “The Benevolent Sisterhood of Inconspicuous Fabricators” leads us through a building full of forgers of every specialty (e.g., Rodins, Biblical apocrypha, Modigliani sketches). “The Magicians at Work” surveys apprentice magicians’ experiments with hoops, mirrors and wires in their quests to perfect their levitation acts. Although these forgers and magicians are sympathetic, they are also initiates who inhabit closed worlds. The poems don’t offer any social context or hint at the characters’ motivations. Thus, at its weakest, the book feels like a mere collection of curiosities.

Other poems probe their subjects more deeply. We are confronted with the grotesque in “Two-Headed Taxidermied Calf.” This somewhat macabre art makes a biological anomaly even more unsettling. “I hated myself for pitying it,” writes Beer. “But there was something / in its tender swirls of ochre hair / that the amateur taxidermist / couldn’t quite make / laughable.” Beer compares this “lifelike” presentation of a dead animal with her own efforts to present herself to the world as happy and psychologically stable. She then admits to having told a lie within the poem, just to see whether she was still good at lying. More is at stake in this poem’s deceptions than in the others, and Beer shows us an uncomfortable connection between socially “necessary” illusions and those that one might find at a sideshow.

Mentioned in passing in the above-mentioned poem, the desire to die is expressed many times throughout the book. This desire, often evoked by living or formerly living things, seems to reflect a yearning for

meaning or transcendence. In a striking poem, Beer is entranced by the vivid red of pork livers on display. “They make / me want to be cleavered and trimmed, / to be made more / tidy than I ever was / while living,” she writes.

These impulses are expressed again, memorably, in a poem in which Beer visits an art gallery and finds “a heart / the size and color of a juvenile black bear / curled in sleep” amid hummocks of turmeric. Apparently intoxicated by the sight and smell, Beer imagines stripping and nuzzling the heart like “a wordless / beast coated in autumnal dust,” her “sentiment gone” and “sympathies torn off like an old sheet.” This desire for regression, in the context of the fascination with death, suggests a feeling of being overwhelmed by contemporary social reality. The reactions that Beer describes so vividly here are human and may be understandable. But, lacking any productive response, the poet seems to be surrendering to (or attempting to escape) our current crises.

Elsewhere, destructive impulses are directed not inward, but outward. In one poem, Beer stands in a brown field, swinging a chainsaw wildly to slice up the sky. In another, Beer and her lover blow up buildings “instead of having sex.” The humorous tone can’t quite cover up an underlying sense of futility and even anti-social frustration.

But flickers of hope appear in poems such as “Scat.” This consideration of the droppings of various animals evolves into a reflection on human frailty and mortality. What emerges is an embrace of life in all its messy concreteness, and this embrace in turn develops into a warm meditation on love and long-term commitment. “Scat” is more complex and interesting than many of the book’s other poems. Although its ending is somewhat mysterious, this poem is affecting and feels sincere.

“Specimen #17,” in which Beer handles pig’s teeth that she keeps in a beaker, also sounds a positive note. Touching these “totems / against fear” with her fingertips gives her a sense of reassurance that she finds difficult to describe. They encourage her “to greet the terrible and joyous / alike with our souls’ most ravenous yes.” This healthy urge echoes the theme of “Scat” and could provide the necessary basis for an active and constructive engagement with the world.

These are some of the best moments in this uneven

collection. Beer is capable of keen observation and striking images. She shows intelligence and imagination. But her new book is a collection of almost exclusively personal poems, some more thoughtful than others (and many merely clever), with almost no view of the social world. Beer has sufficient sensitivity to go further.

In a work that contains “Phonies” and “Fakes” in its title, for example, why is there no reference to the phoniness and fakery of official American life? Why no mention of the big lies used to justify wars that have ruined whole societies and killed vast numbers of people? Why focus only on the minor illusions and masquerades?

The yawning gulf between the way in which the society relentlessly presents itself and its *actuality* is the fundamental falseness of our time. That gulf escapes not only this writer, but most writers. The problem remains: the artists adopt a “cutting edge” and audacious approach to small and even trivial matters, and a mostly timid and passive stance in relation to the burning ones such as war, inequality, dictatorship and the danger of fascism.

Grappling with social reality would broaden Beer’s perspective, enrich her reflections and help her to get at deeper truths.



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