BREAKING MENNONITE: LIVING IN THE CITY

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COVER: Winter Kept Us Warm, print from expired 35mm film, by Clint Enns
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he city was the only place I ever wanted to live, shaking the dust of southern Manitoba with its chicken shit, Gothic Mennonite fundamentalist bigotry, anger, violence, and rural macho bullying from my suede desert boots. The city was Winnipeg and the best news I ever had from my parents was that we would be there by the fall of 1968. So long Mill Road, hello Linacre Road and, best of all, Portage Avenue!

We were not strangers to the city. My mother commuted regularly to complete her BA and BEd, travelling behind snowplows to get home to Gretna on more than one occasion. We travelled to The Bay parkade every other weekend so that my older brother and sister could take serious piano lessons.

The Bay was my first release. I was given a $1 bill to buy a new Peanuts comic in the bookstore. Yup, there was a bookstore in The Bay, and a mezzanine lounge featuring a fountain with live goldfish swimming over copper pennies and fat men reclining in green vinyl armchairs smoking cigars.

By the time I had the run of Portage Avenue, from The Bay to Eaton’s, my sister had effected her escape from the dangers of the village predators to those in the city, those who actually cared she was still underage. Hers were the early sixties: Rae & Jerry’s and jazz nightclubs like Harry Smith’s Club Morocco and Town N’ Country, where her husband-to-be played trumpet. He worked days writing copy for the CJOB station at the corner of Lenore and Portage, now home to the Winnipeg branch of the Canadian Mental Health Association. I have meditated where he wrote that copy. Across the street, Winnipeg Supply is gone, too, replaced by Liquor and Shoppers Drug Marts.

My brother, just a couple of years younger than my sister, was part of another generation. Sleeping over in city communes, he let me tag along to The Manitoban offices, the Schreyer NDP leadership convention, and Liberation Books, or listen to Santana’s Abraxas booming from massive speakers, the air thick with smoke of all kinds in a room with only cushions for furniture.

As it turned out, my first city girlfriend lived on Ruby Street, just a block from where I live now. At fifteen, I wasn’t ready for sex or drugs, but I loved rock ‘n’ roll: “Come Together” festivals closing off Portage Avenue, Opus 69, and Autumn Stone, where I first heard Chilliwack’s hypnotic “Rain-o,” and first encountered drug paraphernalia (owned in partnership, it was rumoured, with someone who had a very Mennonite-sounding last name).

There were a few hiccups before I found my comfort zone at the University of Manitoba. My mother thought for sure I was going to the devil when she heard the strains of Abbey Road from my room. I spent a week as a teenage runaway in a Toronto garret near St. Clair and Yonge before I realized maybe Winnipeg was big enough for me after all, and I was not Leonard Cohen, Miles Davis, Jack Kerouac, or Malcom Lowry.

Of course, that’s not the whole story, but enough about me. There is a whole issue here of city experience to explore in prose, poetry, and visual images. David Bergen treats us to a sneak preview from his new novel Leaving Tomorrow, set in Paris, and Patrick Friesen remembers his trip from Steinbach to Winnipeg, which is, to paraphrase poetry editor Di Brandt, “40 miles and 400 years away.” Enjoy the poetry she has edited and the visual images collected by our new visual arts editor, Murray Toews, who also provides illustration for our two stories. We are also pleased to feature an interview of Eric Friesen by Maurice Mierau, who now edits Rhubarb creative non-fiction.

Reviews editor Julienne Isaacs has made sure you know what’s up in Mennonite publishing, from “bonnet novels” to the debut poetry collection by Melanie Dennis Unrau. Corey Redekop provides closure with a little levity and a reminder that there are more and more Mennonites who have never lived anywhere else than in Metropolis. Cheers!

Victor Enns, President Mennonite Literary Society

Victor Enns’s journey from the country to the city is chronicled in his 2012 poetry collection boy, published by Hagios Press in Regina. Hagios will be publishing his Afghanistan Confessions in 2015.
**Letter to the Editor**

January 23, 2014  
Attention: Mr. Victor Enns, Editor

Dear Mr. Enns,

After reading Edgar H. Schmidt’s candid description of his confrontation with the federal Department of Justice and its officials (“A Menno in the State Apparatus”) I was most impressed with both his personal courage and the excellent legal analysis of the fairly complex issue of determining the proper interpretation of the examination provisions which must be applied in considering the constitutional validity of any proposed legislation.

Surely the simple phrase “inconsistent with” should not be restricted to include only such proposed legislation as would be “ninety-nine percent inconsistent.” And surely, it should be in the government’s and all MPs’ best interest to be fully aware of possible unconstitutionality of legislation which they may be asked to vote about. Mr. Schmidt’s carefully stated views seem eminently fair and legally correct to me.

–John J. Enns, Retired Judge

**Correction**

In our last issue, *Rhubarb* 34, Power and Politics, three bios were mistakenly omitted from the Contributors pages. Luann E. Hiebert’s five poems (“behind the door,” “isn’t it right?”, “mining,” “Meno madness,” and “referee”), Julienne Isaacs’s non-fiction piece “A Good Field,” and Mary Ellen Sullivan’s poem “From This Place,” were significant contributions to the issue. *Rhubarb* apologizes to these writers for not giving them the recognition they deserved. We’ve included their bios at the back of this issue and hope to do better in the future. –Editors

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**EARTH AND GARDENS:** *Rhubarb* Call For Submissions

**Deadline:** June 1, 2014  
**Publication Date:** September 2014

*Rhubarb* is looking for new, unpublished work about earth and/or gardens from writers and artists who self-define as Mennonites, whether practising, genetic, declined, lapsed, or resistant; we also accept writing and visual art by non-Mennonites about Mennonites.

This is the third elemental *Rhubarb* theme. We previously published issues with Water (issue 7) and Fire (issue 10) as themes, which are available for purchase at www.rhubarbmag.com.

**Editors:** Di Brandt (poetry), Bernice Friesen (fiction), Maurice Mierau (non-fiction), Murray Toews (visual art), Carly Schellenberg (Web/social media). Julienne Isaacs is our reviews editor, and we generally accept assigned reviews only.

**General Guidelines**

**Poetry:** Up to 30 lines.  
**Fiction and non-fiction:** Up to 3,000 words.  
**Artwork:** Black-and-white artwork including high-contrast photographs that reproduce well in the magazine printing process. A limited number of colour images are used in each issue, including a cover image and images for an art feature inside.

**Submissions**

Submit to *Rhubarb* using the submission form at www.rhubarbmag.com or by email to submit@rhubarbmag.com. Submissions should include a short bio and the full name and address of the contributor. **Please include your name on every page.** Attachments are accepted in Word doc or docx formats. Images are accepted as tiffs or jpegs. Snail mail submissions are also accepted at:

*Rhubarb* c/o MLS  
606-100 Arthur Street  
Winnipeg, MB R3B 1H3.
Encircled

by Kaitlyn Nafziger Jantzi

Nineteen ninety-two was not a good year to be gay in Small Town Ontario. It was slightly better to be gay in Medium City Ontario, so that’s where my mother moved.

I was already ashamed of being a “city girl.” In school we had to tell about our pets: I had one cat, Cuddles. I called her a Holstein cat because she was black and white. My friends would list innumerable barn cats, cows, pigs, dogs.

All my friends lived on farms. In their barns we would build hay forts, painstakingly piling bales one upon the other, creating hay dwellings with windows and doors to crawl through. Sometimes, when we were extra ambitious, we’d connect these habitats of fodder with elaborate tunnels. In their barns we would play tag, running along the beams two stories above the straw-covered ground.

One year my friend’s dad’s construction company ordered huge sheets of Styrofoam. We carefully piled these enormous bleached panels and spent the afternoon jumping from rafters and smashing the towers of crunchy plastic. Later that day bits of synthetic snow slipped from our hair and out of our pockets. It piled conspicuously on the cracked linoleum kitchen floor as we sat side by side for a lecture that seemed to go on for hours.

The first “city” I lived in was in fact a hamlet of less than 300 people. About 150 of them lived in the old folks’ home, and beyond that there was a farm machinery dealership—my grandfather’s—and a general store/post office/tanning salon, which later got out of the cereal and candy business and became only a post office/tanning salon.

In my 7-year-old mind this was indeed a city of sorts. I had a backyard and a front yard, neighbours, and a paved road in front of my house. Requirements for a farm were not met, and thus I was, as they told me at school, a “city girl.” It was that year when my mother moved to the city—the other city, the real city—the noisy world of people who wore head coverings very different than the one my grandmother wore, the place of the enormous shining shopping malls, where there were more cars than people, and where I was terrified to ride my bicycle. It was 100 times larger than the “city” I grew up in, and from this point on I lived between them, every other day and weekends, back and forth from country to city. A thirty-five minute drive that I could still do now with my eyes closed, my body moving with each curve and hill, the kinetic knowledge of those roads ingrained at a muscular level. At first I thought my friends weren’t allowed to come to my mom’s house because it was in the city. Then I thought it was because of me. Then I stopped asking.

In 1992, I was learning about place value in math and the intricacies of when it is acceptable to call “time out” at recess. My elementary school was farm-locked. We were an island of children ferried in on yellow buses that stopped at farm laneways to collect children huddled in huts at the ends of their long drives, bundled against the snow, waiting and waiting. My mom would drive me to school every other morning. We would wake up early and pour tea in our mugs, which made me feel very grown up. I usually drank peppermint because it smelled like summertime in my best friend’s meadow.

As she drove my mother would act out stories. She played innumerable characters in twisted tales. She was the old man who yelled at neighbourhood kids, the little German woman who was always “sweepink da house, sweepink da house,” and the eccentric teenage boy who snorted when he laughed. I would sip my tea and interrogate these passengers. For years she kept expanding these characters, characters with back stories, families, and personal dramas, characters who only appeared on this precious journey to school. It was an every-other-day migration. From pavement and stoplights to gravel and corn fields, I would shed my city skin as we approached the school.

My grade-four teacher was from Toronto. He took a week off when they were spraying liquid manure on...
the farms around the school. We were a child kingdom surrounded by a protective moat of stench that no city teacher could penetrate. We never respected him after that week.

I never told anyone at school about my mom. At school I pretended she didn’t exist, that she had moved to the city and lived there alone and lonely, penitent as a home wrecker should be. Our child culture was strong and my home situation was never mentioned, an elementary school omertà held by all. There was a boy with the last name Crapper whom nobody liked. He was scrappy and mean, and always smelled like canned meat. One recess I joined the others hurling insults and he looked at me and said, “Well at least my mom isn’t a lezzie!” Shocked that he had spoken the unspeakable, that which I wasn’t quite certain of myself, I stepped back. The crowd of child bullies was silenced by the speaking of the secret and looked at me; I turned on my shaky legs and walked away, swearing never to look in anyone’s eyes again.

I had exactly two friends at school who were not Mennonite. And they were both allowed to play at my mom’s house. I supposed at the time it was because they were already so saturated in sin that being in a house steeped in sexual immorality didn’t affect them the same way it would my friends from church. When we went to the cottage in the summer I had to ask one of them to come with me. Neither of them would have been my first choice, but when you have limited options you take what you can.

My mom’s partner died the April I was in grade six. At church my dad stood up at sharing time and said my mom’s friend had died. I remember the collective eyes upon us, I remember the words of comfort left unsaid, and I remember my friend approaching me three days later at school on the playground as I sat on a swing, replaying the funeral: the deep red of the drapes, the smooth wood of the casket.

She sat beside me and said, “You know you shouldn’t care that she’s dead, right? There’s nothing you can do, she’s in Hell anyway.” I kept swinging, and hearing the quiet singing from the service and seeing my mother’s head bowed, unmoving. I was starting a new school the following September, and I remember praying that my mom wouldn’t find a new partner, that without another woman she would cease to be a lesbian. My grief mingled with relief at the idea that I wouldn’t have to tell friends at my new school about my mom. I was going to a Mennonite high school in the city—and from my half-decade of learning as a child of a lesbian mother in the early nineties, I knew one thing for certain: Mennonites hate gays.

At my new school they called me a “country girl”—my town with its three street lamps and four stop signs was laughable—and I laughed too. I took a bus into the city from my dad’s house. A group of parents had gotten together and chartered a bus for us to travel from the surrounding small towns into the city for school. We passed silos and general stores; we put on makeup and hitched up our skirts while we sat on the bus.

At my mom’s I deleted messages from her new girlfriend. And yet, there are only so many times you can say “I’m sorry, mom said to tell you she doesn’t want you to call anymore,” so many messages you can delete, before she moves in. There are only so many cold stares and shoulders turned. There are only so many times you can see your mother who was grieving laugh again before you too begin to smile.

I learned as a 12-year-old that, as it happens, City Mennonites and Country Mennonites differ in one important way: City Mennonites are less afraid of catching homosexuality. I don’t remember “coming out” to my friends about my mom, but slowly they all knew (tell one person and the whole school, the whole city—large though it seemed—knew); and we never talked about it, but they were all allowed at my house. My mom and her new partner had a commitment ceremony when I was in grade eight. I played the flute as they walked down the aisle. There was a crowd
of people there to celebrate, mostly women, mostly my mother’s age. I moved among them comfortably. These were the women who filled my city living room, who brought casseroles during sickness and balloons during celebrations. We ate, we danced, and on Monday I went to school and told no one.

I have a cousin who recently left her husband for another woman. I meet with her daughter, my first cousin once removed, every month for breakfast. “What are the odds?” I ask my friends, “that my story is repeated in my family? That I can speak to this little girl what no one spoke to me?” We agree they’re probably pretty low.

My cousin’s daughter and I go to Cora’s for breakfast. We order the same thing, but hers is from the children’s menu and half the price. We talk about school, about the play she’s in, and she tells me about her hamsters. I see how easy it is to talk around, to never mention, to accept the happy child before you, to not want to push it. But I do, and there are things to talk about, like insensitive teachers (I heard you moved? Oh just your mom? Is she living with someone else? A boyfriend?) and supportive friends (Stop asking her!). For her it’s a non-issue at church, no one talks about Hell or generational sin; I release the breath I didn’t know I was holding. We make a date for next month. I drop her off at her dad’s house and turn my car onto the highway.

Twenty-two years later my history has repeated itself in my family, but this time they all stayed in the country, two blocks apart in Small Town Ontario: ex-husband, my cousin, her partner, kids. I have to consciously loosen my grip on the steering wheel as I speed past trees and barns toward my home in the city.
Lion in the City

by Patrick Friesen

The lion at the zoo; that wild smell, animal and despair. That was the point of my first entry into Winnipeg. My parents would drive into the city one Sunday each summer for us to see the animals and have a picnic. It took an hour from Steinbach to the outskirts of Winnipeg those days. Once we'd passed through the city (no Perimeter Highway at the time), there was that long drive along Wellington Crescent, with its massive stone houses, to get to Assiniboine Park. I remember white-shirted men playing cricket on large well-kept lawns near the Pavilion. And, then, the zoo. All I remember of the zoo now is the lion in his cage. There were stories of the lion turning his back to the bars and sending a long stream of piss onto the people gawking at him. I loved the notion and always wondered if he'd do that while I was there. I stood back a little. But I was there in Winnipeg staring at this image of the wild. A kind of mixed introduction to the city.

One day my mother decided I should have dental work done in Winnipeg. This would be my second entry into the city. My aunt and uncle farmed just outside Steinbach near the village of Chortitz. Once a week they drove to Winnipeg in their panel truck to deliver eggs to market. I was sent along this time so that a separate trip could be avoided and money saved. I sat between them, their adult talk washing over me while I contemplated the terrors of dentistry. They dropped me off at the dentist's office and then headed out to do their business. Later, when their business was done and my dental experience concluded, they picked me up. What remains is the memory of a sign on a storefront near the dentist's office. The Man With the Axe. The arm and axe, in neon, moved, though there was no indication of what they were hacking at. And I remember announcements of upcoming dances at various community clubs and high schools in Winnipeg. The names of the venues, of the bands, were magical, incantatory. Crescentwood, Earl Grey, River Heights, The Deverons, Finders Keepers, The Mongrels, Neil Young and The Squires, Chad Allan and The Expressions, and so on. I heard there were 200 garage bands in the city. I couldn't get to these places, but I knew this was where I was heading. Sooner, rather than later. Entering Winnipeg over radio waves, a Winnipeg of the mind, of the imagination. The clean getaway from my hometown, the thirteen-mile corner and Highway 59, heading toward the action, wanting all the experience I could get.

Cold clear fall nights I could see the halo of Winnipeg's light from the outskirts of town. I'm sure there were some in town who saw that light as hellish, but to me it was a kind of liberation, a magnetic northern light. I fully intended to attend university in that city, and I intended to live downtown, anonymous in some rented room, catching a bus to class. And I did. Independent and free. Listening to lectures, trading ideas...
with fellow students and profs, exploring my own ideas by writing papers about writers and thinkers of the past. Back to the room, reading as much as I wanted, and what I wanted, late into the night. Writing, always writing. Mostly lousy poems, but a few were seeds dug deep.

Sitting at the window of my room in a boarding house near beautiful Knox United Church on Edmonton, glancing up to watch the old men play chess in Central Park. Turning back to whatever I was reading. Or, getting up to play a new Dylan album on my small portable turntable: “Desolation Row,” the brilliance of that. A pile of half-worked poems on the table. A roomful of dreams. Anything was possible.

A few years later, by 1967, a lot of people my age headed for the country, wanting to get “back to nature.” But for me it was the city. I wanted the anonymity where you could live your life less scrutinized than in a small town. All I needed was a room or small suite and, to paraphrase Woolf, a few dollars. You could live on a lot less then. I wanted cinemas and bars, bookstores and record shops and street life. I was more observer than participant, watching from the edge, but it all fed my imagination, my writing. One foot in, one foot out.

The idea of a regular job, other than the usual summer job, never entered my mind. It was not something I thought about until I graduated. Life would not be defined by a specific career, by an economic framework. It was just life. Learning every day, all day, not with some financial objective in mind, but for the sake of my physical and spiritual existence on earth. Entering a discourse with books and people, a world much looser than what I’d been brought up in. Mind could roam where it wanted, needed, and voice could speak. With variety in the population more was possible in a city. There were fewer boundaries, or the boundaries that existed were more negotiable.

Strangely, the city was more open than my small town and the countryside around it. As the old saying went, on the prairies you could sit on your back porch and watch your dog run away all day. The problem was that if you stayed out there another day you could watch him run back. No place to go but “out,” or “away,” and then back again. A great place to live if what you wanted was space. I wanted time, and I found there was always somewhere to go in Winnipeg. And having somewhere to go carved time out of space.

There was much I enjoyed about small-town life and life in the scrub brush and clearings just outside town, but was it nature? The terrain was measured and shaped by humans, especially colonizers. We told directions by mile roads, street names and numbers and intersections. Always someone owned whatever land I might have been crossing. There was truly nothing wild about the countryside, though a few undomesticated animals existed there.

So, yes, there was a relationship to the stars on clear evenings, and to the nearly constant wind, but it never felt as if I was walking through wilderness, or passing through something sacred. Whatever was sacred was hidden from us, in our utter ignorance, but clearings gave me the shivers, as if something mystical was afoot. A child is closer to it. I entered clearings as if I were an animal being preyed upon. It’s where I learned to watch from the edge. But overall it all felt like sculpted terrain, shaped for settlement at one time and later for profit.

I wanted something other than town life, something more intense in its flow. It wasn’t really a choice between nature and the city; it was rural organization or big city organization. And the latter carried a lot of culture I had not been exposed to, and I had a deep longing for that. I knew I lived within history, but what was my part in it? What was my relationship to the ideas and actions of the artists and thinkers who went before me?

There are different kinds of history, and I like city history, and I like the history of its small everyday details. History as poetry. Microcosm. I like the history
of alleys and streets. Of course, most any European city has a lot more of that than Winnipeg; cities built for human beings, not for cars. Still, there were interesting streets to know; Osborne in the sixties was a home for counterculture, Osborne from Stradbrook to Memorial Park where young people met every summer night in 1967, dancing in the fountains. And streets like River and Wardlaw had their resonances. Bannatyne, too, Salter and Stella. We really did think anything was possible. Not a bad way to be, and such a time will come around again, turning from greed and fear.

I bought cigarettes at Glow’s Pharmacy on Osborne across from Champ’s. Pall Malls for a while, then Rothmans, and sometimes Matinées because I thought they’d help me quit. Listening to Patch of Blue, a pretty good cover band often playing at Champ’s. Then, when the upstairs closed for the night, heading downstairs to the late-night lounge with Richard, Frank, or John, to listen to the Don Brown Trio or Pat Riordan, an entertainer with a quick and acid wit.

Living at the end of Carlton on the banks of the Assiniboine in the mid-seventies, I woke early one morning to violent cracking sounds. I walked out the back and saw ice breaking up and moving toward the junction with the Red. One floe held a beat-up old car, another had an uprooted tree. Watching a chaotic parade of human detritus and torn nature, all ready to sink beneath the sun.

I loved getting around with transit those days. Each ride provided enough characters or events to start a new novel, or at least a short story. Bits of poetry, too. I remember getting on the bus and sitting beside John Moriarty. This took a little nerve on my part; he taught English at the University of Manitoba and had iconic stature on campus. His glorious mop of hair like Dylan’s on the cover of Blonde on Blonde, his golden silk shirt and brown corduroy jacket; I was in awe of him. Sometimes I sat in on his classes just to hear him talk. He had that Irish rhythm and honey in his voice, talking about the concept of eternity in Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, or Yeats’s notion of virginity renewing itself like the moon. Anyway, I had to say something so I asked him about some contradiction I thought I’d spotted in Dylan Thomas’s poems. Moriarty glanced at me, turned back to the window. “Well, he’s a poet.” My cheeks burned.

So many encounters, entries into streets that were new and dangerous to me. Speed and intensity. As I’ve already suggested, one thing I missed from the country was the wind. For me the wind at my ears was a voice, voices. The wind fluttering the poplar leaves was a voice. If anything drove me into poetry it was the wind. But I heard it in Winnipeg as well. There were enough open spaces for that, and Winnipeg was not yet tall enough to block the wind; in fact, it tended to funnel the north wind down Main Street, and the west wind along Portage Avenue. And where these streets met, you stood at the centre of Canada, you stood where the Winnipeg Strike of 1919 had happened. Sometimes, while crossing the street, I thought I heard a lion’s roar on the wind. A hint of wildness, the exotic. But it was just my imagination. That lion was long dead.

**Streets like River and Wardlaw had their resonances. Bannatyne, too, Salter and Stella.**
For the rural among us, and particularly for the Mennonite rural among us, the city can be a place of paradox. It can be a beacon of culture and opportunity, while at the same time a daunting and impersonal citadel. I grew up in rural Manitoba and, as a child, only ventured into the nearest city on rare occasions. I know well that I was not the only youth to cringe in the back seat of our family car while my father’s blood boiled in the urban traffic. He woefully and dutifully navigated the labyrinth of one-way streets and the rush-hour mayhem that plagued the route of our annual shopping sojourns.

I have often pictured rural children through the ages also recoiling in the backs of carts and wagons as their peasant fathers tested the mettle of their draught animals on the rough stone paths of historical urban centres. Would the child’s momentary glance at a monolithic cathedral or sprawling market eclipse the grumblings of a prickly patriarch? Were parents ever fearful that the city’s lustre would one day coax their children to leave for the bright lights?

I imagine that some of the same hopes and fears gripped the broader Mennonite community as it encountered the paradox of urban existence over the ages. Historically, the Anabaptists have enjoyed mixed results with their urban encounters. From the persecution of the first Anabaptists in Zurich to the infamous rebellion and siege of Muenster, to the modern trends of global urbanization still underway, examples abound of how urban environments both complicate and enrich Mennonite identity.

History’s contradictions have pushed and pulled the Mennonite identity from continent to continent, and from city to city, along with the people seeking refuge from oppression and the space to live in peace. In some instances, the “push” of the city was the issue, forcing some of the first Anabaptists from their homes and businesses, and scattering them into the countryside on pain of death. At other times the “pull,” or gravity, of the city was the dominant force, drawing Anabaptist crowds from across continents to practice their faith, free of harassment. Between the two extremes it is also possible to see how Mennonites were neither repelled from the city nor sucked into the swirling urban cacophony, but were rather co-creators of an enduring urban space.

Nonviolent resistance, the refusal to bear arms or enter uniformed military service, and baptism upon confession of faith were among some of the core values that put this community at odds with local populations. In post-Reformation Europe, Mennonites were often given special status and were not considered citizens in most areas until the late eighteenth century. Under persecution of both Church and State they often avoided urban centres in favour of living off the land in isolated rural settings. This provided the double benefit of minimizing antagonism with Church and State authorities, as well as mitigating the acculturating influence of local urban populations.

The threat of acculturation, of cultural hybridization, or dilution, which takes place in multicultural environments, was one of the guiding concerns of early Mennonite communities. In the countryside, the Mennonites were relatively free from outside influence in both culture and economics, as their skill in farming and craft trades allowed them to remain largely self-sufficient. In Europe’s rural periphery, the agrarian Mennonite communities were often left to govern themselves autonomously, and when confronted with the prospect of State or Church demands to compromise certain values, chose instead to relocate to a less restrictive land. Others in the community would stay and adjust to the new laws of the land, risking the compromise of their cultural identity.

The contradictory influence of the urban is not simply a modern phenomenon for the Mennonites, though. For starters, it was in Zurich, Switzerland’s largest city and its economic hub, that the Anabaptist movement began in the first place.
The bearing of arms in this urban conflict was justified in part through the belief that by their actions, the Muensterites were ushering in the Kingdom of Heaven.

However, by this time the territory’s Bishop had begun to lay siege to the city, and many of the Dutch refugees were intercepted by the Bishop’s armies en route and put to death. In Muenster, nonviolent resistance, which was a central value to much of the Anabaptist community, was abandoned as the city defended itself against its surrounding attackers. The bearing of arms in this urban conflict was justified in part through the belief that by their actions, the Muensterites were ushering in the Kingdom of Heaven and Christ’s Second Coming. The slaughter was theologically justified by many through the belief that “the ‘children of Jacob’ would be actively engaged in helping God punish and annihilate the ‘children of Esau,’ at the time of the establishment of the kingdom of God.”

Other actions within the city walls extended the notoriety of the rebellion, further complicating the plight of hopeful Dutch refugees. Reports emerged of the burning of all books which were not Biblical, and polygamy being practiced by the movement’s lead figures, such as Jan Van Leyden. On one hand, droves of refugees were fleeing persecution in their homelands only to be butchered en route to their rumoured urban reprieve. Those who survived the journey would find many of those within the city’s walls had abandoned some of the values that had come to define the movement they championed. Others would have been receptive to the fanatical preaching within the city’s walls and, breathing relief from previous persecution, joined their Anabaptist brethren in bearing arms for the righteous cause. In this way one can imagine the city of Muenster representing one of the most formidable urban paradoxes in the Mennonites’ early history.

In such extreme and fleeting circumstances, what can be said about the contradictions of the urban? Is the concept of urban acculturation even relevant in such anomalous examples? It can certainly be argued that acculturation is not a process borne of such fleeting circumstances, but is rather one that must take place through socialization among an outside
hegemonic cultural influence over an extended period of time. Acculturation in Muenster would therefore not apply, since the besieging Bishop’s armies stormed the gates, abolished the democratic government, and tortured the rebellion’s leaders to death only a year after the rebellion began.

But with the rebellion’s context in mind, I think it is also interesting to ponder a kind of acculturation that can happen in a flash; the way in which an individual can, in one moment, renounce a lifelong way of thinking under a vessel of poured water, as in the baptismal ritual embraced by the Anabaptists. Unlike the protracted pace of the country, cities are conducive to rapid transformation. I wonder if any such spontaneous transformations took place among the young Dutch refugees as their Anabaptist parents carted them through the fires of war and rebellion to seek sanctuary in the besieged city of “New Jerusalem,” alight with blazing books, run by polygamist patriarchs, and yet also uniquely tolerant of their religious convictions.

The events in Muenster and Zurich are two historical extremes in the early Anabaptist experience of urbanization. They are also both examples that predate the formation of the formal Mennonite movement, as Menno Simons himself was only reported to have renounced Catholicism in 1536. On the more contemporary side of urban history, an example closer to home helps illustrate the balance between the city’s paradoxical push and pull.

North Kildonan is a neighbourhood in the northeast area of present day Winnipeg, but it used to be a small Mennonite township on the outskirts of a burgeoning city. Consisting of only about nine square miles, this area did not host a substantial farming population, but rather only small chicken farms and vegetable gardens. Settled by a group of about ten Mennonite families in the late 1920s, it was amalgamated into Winnipeg officially in 1972, boasting a population of nearly 19,000. Here, the slow version of acculturation was able to proceed as the township became a neighbourhood and the homogenous ethnic, religious, and linguistic composition of the township became the heterogeneous, multi-ethnic neighbourhood known by Winnipeggers today.

Yet, in North Kildonan there remains to this day a strong Mennonite presence in the residents, organizations, and institutions. The legacy of this former township endures by hosting more Mennonite cultural programming and community services than any other area of the city. Among the examples of resistance to acculturation are the Mennonite Brethren Collegiate Institute (MBCI), the Mennonite Central Committee thrift store and administration offices, and seven Mennonite churches.

My personal favourite Kildonan contribution is Sam’s Place bookstore and café. This mostly volunteer-run Kildonan staple arose in part from the need to store and display the vast troves of used books gathered by the MCC thrift stores across Manitoba. Now the venue hosts a cornucopia of cultural programming, live music, locally sourced food, fair trade coffee, and gently read literary splendour. Outside of the city’s two post-secondary Mennonite institutions, it boasts the largest collection of Mennonite literature and history books, including the only private bookstore section dedicated to rare Low German works.

I have personally slung coffee and waited tables at Sam’s alongside Mennonite youth from MBCI. While they may not have spoken the Plautdietsch of their grandparents’ North Kildonan township, many still bear their urban roots with a sense of connection to the values and culture of their distinct heritage. Not one of them tended a small chicken barn in their backyard. While some parts of every culture are inevitably lost, the blessing of the urban paradox is that even as some cultural elements, such as language, are shed, still others, such as the shared values of service and tolerance, can rise to the surface and be shared with a larger community.

Note:
One Body, Many Homes

by Emily Harnish

September 24, 2013

Today, sitting in the lab, I had a sudden, sharply clear memory from last fall, of eating supper in the park with my home group from Early Church.

The sun setting, running down the hill with Sonya, holding Jonny; he was still just a baby. Diane with a chicken in a Crock-Pot, and the kids telling me about butchering it. Biking there and back, food in my basket; the corn salad, maybe? (How happy it makes me to realize I contributed enough times I can’t remember what I brought.)

Oh, I thought today, like pressing on a bruise, Jonny will be talking now, maybe. I wonder if Katie and James have trained Edison out of jumping on the kitchen table and chewing up their books. Rebecca will be pulling out her winter sweaters, now, and wearing them to church.

All I want right now is to sit in my tree on the hill behind Eastern Mennonite University (EMU), with the time and space and silence to write.

I grew up in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, a hotbed of Swiss-German Anabaptists mixed with a healthy dose of evangelical fervour. The farmland is the stuff of myth, or at least tourism brochures, which shout without fail about visiting Amish farms in Paradise Township.

My childhood memories are of chasing lightning bugs through interlinking yards, walking down cracking macadam roads, pushing a canoe into the murky waters of the Pequea.

Moving to Harrisonburg, Virginia to attend Eastern Mennonite University didn’t feel like much of a change. It was the same small-town feel. It was entering a community with familiar last names.

Now, I work at the National Institutes of Health (NIH) in Bethesda, Maryland, near Washington, DC. I live a scant five miles from the centre of political power in the United States.

I didn’t vote in the 2012 elections.

I wonder, often, if I belong here.

The first week of my internship, everything is overwhelming. New work, new people; and then there’s Bethesda itself, the three lanes of traffic headed each direction around the NIH campus, the mad crush of people at rush hour, the shock of being two days removed from a place where I knew even the cracks in the roads.

I bump into Mary in the break room my first week. A graduate student in the lab next to mine, she has already helped me find my way through the labyrinthine building more than once. “So tell me again, what school did you go to?” she asks, fiddling with the microwave.

“Eastern Mennonite,” I respond. I wait for the questions.

She glances over at me. “Is that a religious school?” I nod. “So is it like . . .” her voice trails off, and she leans against the counter, turning her full attention on me.

“Like how with some Catholic schools, how they can be really Catholic, or, you know.”

One of my best friends from school is agnostic, and gay, and Mennonite. There is no good way to answer this question-not-question. I open my mouth, hesitate. “Um,” I say.

“Did you have to go to chapel?” she prompts.

“No.”

“My cousin had to, at this Catholic school,” she says. “I always thought that was kind of weird.”

I’ve never lived in a place where multiple languages were spoken, where you couldn’t predict the skin colour of the next person to walk through the door of the Giant grocery store. Now I am renting from a Scottish immigrant of Indian descent, and I might hear any of seven languages spoken in my lab on a daily basis.
One day at the bus stop a dark-skinned woman rushes up to me, looking flustered, and asks to borrow my cell phone. I hand it over. She speaks, rapid-fire, in a language I don’t recognize, and when she hangs up she thanks me profusely.

“It’s my first day,” she says, pointing over her shoulder at the NIH campus.

“Where are you from?” I ask, trying to place her accent while I pocket my phone.

“South Africa,” she says.

“Nice to meet you,” I offer.

It isn’t long before a man appears around the corner. They talk, bending their heads together, and then he turns towards me. “Thank you,” he says. His eyes are serious.

“No problem.” I’m scanning the oncoming traffic for my bus. I won’t remember, later, whether he smiles. I won’t remember whether I smile back.

On Halloween, the Hungarian man in the lab asks, “Really? You can go to any house, and knock, and they will give you candy?” It sounds insane when he says it out loud. I write “call home: Halloween” on a sticky note, imagining my parents chuckling over the phone.

My housemate and I go to an event downtown, the
“17th Street High Heel Race.” The participants? Men in drag. In the metro station, a violinist and guitarist are playing “Demons” by Imagine Dragons. We climb the never-ending escalator, the lyrics echoing in my ears. “This is my kingdom come, this is my kingdom come…”

The crowds of people on the streets shock me. We climb on a dumpster and peer over them. Police glide up and down the street on Segways. At times I can only see their heads whizzing above the crowd. They make me want to laugh. It’s hard to see from our perch on the dumpster, but eventually I make out some of the costumes. I can’t remember if I’ve actually ever seen a man wearing high heels before.

The Chinese woman in the lab asks about my family, if we’re close. I am not thinking about the graphs on my computer screen, the ones that tell stories about the proteins inside of nerve cells. I am thinking instead about Thanksgiving and the email chain with my aunts and uncles signing up for different dishes. “Yeah,” I say, nonchalant. I am thinking of Dutch Blitz games and date pudding. “Most of my family—on both sides—lives in the same county in Pennsylvania.”

“Wow,” she says. My eyes slide back into focus and I remember that her parents live in China, that she is a product of the one-child policy.

My family calls me the adventurer, living two hours away from home; maybe it isn’t all that surprising that even small things feel noteworthy. Like the day I almost miss the bus coming out of work because of construction in the lane in front of the bus stop. I run out into the closed lane and wave at the bus. The driver pulls over half a block down the street. It feels like I’m turning into one of those city-slicker New Yorkers from the movies. I imagine this is how it would feel to be one of those people who very confidently hail a taxi in a crowded street.

The man from the barbecue stand across the road from work hands me my change. “You take care, hon,” he says. The feminist voice in my head is trying to make herself heard. I smile, blink, find myself crossing the road in a daze. I am so lonely.

I write a letter to a friend who is still living in the city she grew up in. “It’s strange,” I tell her. “It’s strange to live and work in a place that hums along just fine without paying any attention to spirit, to soul, to sacredness. I’m not sure what to make of it.”

My grandparents come to visit and as we walk around the city a man starts following us, asking for money. His eyes are jittery, his speech too fast. I feel frozen with shame, which doesn’t even make sense. I tell myself that furiously for weeks afterward, but nevertheless, those are the facts. I am burning with it, my face heating. My grandpa pulls out a dollar bill and hands it over.

“God bless you, sir.”

He’s military. He shows us his ID. Maybe I’m feeling residual shame for a country at war. Maybe it’s shame at a system that leaves mental wounds to fester. Maybe it’s shame that my grandparents are so easily fleeced. Maybe it’s shame that I wouldn’t have given him anything.

One Friday my coworkers and I go downtown for lunch, to an Indian buffet. We sit around the table: Chinese, South Korean, Indian, Mexican, Australian. They are all laughing, talking about work. My mentor talks about her kids. Ranjana bites into the gajar halwa and sighs. She talks about her mother, who used to make the same dessert, but years ago and 7,000 miles away. I want to freeze the moment, bottle it up. It is the closest this place has come to feeling like home.

In the middle of traffic at Greentree and Old Georgetown I notice the two black women waiting for the crosswalk to start counting down. I walk confidently past them, into the six lanes. I have the right of way. The light is green and I step into traffic; I step out onto the dark pavement and the car turning right honks, the driver leaning into the sound.

I keep walking. The light is green. I’m not who I was. I hold my head up and stare into middle distance. My boots thunk on the solid road.
The first church I attend in Maryland I find not from Google but from an NIH scientist who graduated from Goshen College. She emailed me to tell me about a Mennonite church just outside of DC.

I like it. I run into my boss, which is unexpected but okay. Everyone is friendly. They invite me to the potluck after the service. It feels familiar, like a blend between churches I’ve been to in Lancaster and something from EMU. I feel cheerful on the way home, fond, almost, and I don’t even mind the few miles on the Beltway. It’s strange, because usually I hate driving in this area.

I go out one night for drinks with four of the post-docs from my lab. Jian downs two beers and emerges from his workday shyness. He leans toward me and shouts over the background noise of the bar, asking if most Americans smoke pot. Normal, everyday Americans, not the ones on TV shows or in the movies. “Did you?” he asks, eyes wide.

I laugh, thinking about how careful I have always been not to break the rules. I didn’t drink alcohol until I was twenty years old and was handed a wine-drinking Palestinian host family in the West Bank. Who can say what is normal?

“No,” I answer honestly, and take another bite of my Reuben.

“Really?” he says, sounding disappointed.

Luís laughs, and soon we are talking about drug deals in Mexico City.

It’s fun. It’s really fun, and I feel startled and grateful. I’m smiling even as I brush my teeth that night before bed.

December 7, 2013

I had a conversation with the boss today, about how hard it is for me to ask questions. “And my personality is such that I’m more likely to just sit and try to figure it out. But I’m getting better at using Chan as a resource, I think.”

He looked at me closely. Nodded. “Constitutionally, I’m like that. Maybe it’s a Mennonite thing. Take care of yourself, be self-sufficient. You know.”

I could feel the corner of my mouth tipping up. Yes, I know.

“But you’re still having fun,” he asked, before sending me on my way to catch the bus. “You’re still feeling like you’re growing? Because that’s high on my priority list.”

I paced in the elevator, too alive to keep still.

December 8, 2013

It’s time to do some Christmas decorations around the apartment.

December 19, 2013

I’m making good progress on my list of things to do. By which I mean, I am getting so good at DC public transit!

January 1, 2014

Here’s to a year of being just a little uncomfortable and a lot awake.

There are tall trees lining my street, and in the evening, when I am either biking home or walking up from the bus stop, I sometimes stop and look up at the leaves. The way the sun sets, the lay of the land, the hills, and the location of the buildings in the neighbourhood to the west mean that the setting sun lights up the trees from underneath. They glow, the bark turning orange and the leaves lined with gold.

Maybe I am learning to love the place I am in.
Breaking Mennonite
The Village in the City

by Joy Huebert

The Means of Production: On the colony in Ukraine my grandmother could raise and butcher a pig, could keep a cow for milk, could raise chickens for eggs, could grow a vegetable garden, could can fruits and vegetables for winter, could make clothing and quilts, could grind wheat for bread, could make bread.

What I Can Do: Go to work, earn money, pay for things.

The Community: My grandmother lived a rural lifestyle in a closed German-speaking community with people who’d been on the land for over 200 years after being invited to farm there by Catherine the Great, Queen of Russia. No drinking, no smoking, no jewellery, no makeup, no mixing with the locals. Lots of singing, eating, farm work, religion.

Where I Live: City! In peace, prosperity, and freedom, a fabulous relocation after peace in Russia was wrenched away by revolution, Stalin, war, and Communism. My mother’s parents barely escaped through the Finland gate, although their three sons died during the flight. My father’s father died during one of Stalin’s purges and his family did not reach Canada until after the suffering of the Second World War. Other relatives were trapped and sent to Siberia; some of them eventually moved to East Germany and then West Germany. The scattering took my family so fortunately to Canada, Manitoba, and eventually to Winnipeg where they settled in North Kildonan, the new village.

I was a child of peace and plenty. The moves had been made, the suffering endured, the new life achieved. The church stood. My grandmother had

My sainted grandmother is in heaven baking Lebkuchen and looking after things.
relinquished her cow and chickens but cultivated an extensive garden. She lived close to her surviving relatives and walked to church. Her missing sons were eventually replaced with four daughters and eight grandchildren. The suffering was aired during family gatherings, but generally it was put behind the community, who clung to each other and their faith and made new lives.

In this enclave, the new village in the city, you could hear Low German spoken on the street. Your children attended a special school for Mennonites where they didn’t have to be subjected to the malign influences of the “Englishers,” and eventually businesses and stores were owned and managed by our Own Kind. Religion was very important.

I am a beloved member of this new village. My grandparents were revered and respected elders, survivors, and contributors. The community gathered around the church for ritual celebrations of Easter, Christmas, and survival. German continued to be the main language, insulating the elders from the wider community, as they had been insulated in Ukraine. No revolution overturned their village in Canada, but over time the prevailing culture seeped in, taking away German along with the elder generation. I experienced disconnection and unreality as my strong faith met the outsiders, their ideas and culture. At church, questioning was met with simple statements: “Read your Bible. The answers are in the Bible.” I didn’t fit in. People, like my father, who had remained in Europe to experience the war were traumatized in ways that the community couldn’t address, and I was affected. People who didn’t fit in had to leave.

I still visit the North Kildonan village, which has spread across Winnipeg, leading to many Mennonite churches, schools, stores, and organizations, including an art gallery. We grapple with our identity. I used to grapple more. I left the church, not fitting in and finding it did not meet my social or intellectual needs or describe a world I could understand. I have moved to the wider community, where I no longer attend church nor even think about it.

However, the village lives on. When I return to Winnipeg and visit relatives, I am recognized as one of the community, unfortunately fallen away, but that’s not a problem, really. My sainted grandmother is in heaven baking Lebkuchen and looking after things. Her love, patience, and cooking ensure that unto all generations will her descendants enter the Kingdom.

There is no escape. After decades of atheism, and after providing no religious instruction whatsoever to my son, he has become a religious studies major. He asks whether it would be possible to live on a colony. I explain that colonies are not friendly to outsiders. You need to speak German and have been born there.

Lately I have noticed myself creating other sorts of colonies in my life: the writing community, the work community, the neighbourhood. Even without the cows and chickens, I feel very blessed to have the skills to make small groups around me where I can experience the togetherness and sense of belonging that were lost in the move away from North Kildonan Village.
Leaving

by David Bergen

At the age of nineteen, after spending a year getting to know a very emotionally constant girl named Dorothy, and falling back for a time on tradition and religion, I decided one day to throw off my traces and I kissed Dorothy goodbye at the airport in Calgary and flew to Toronto and then on to Paris where I was to live with a French family and earn my keep by teaching English to their 8-year-old son.

Dorothy had long straight dark hair that she often let cascade to her waist, or sometimes pulled into braids. Her father owned the saddlery in town and she worked for him. She immediately fell for my wit, and I was attracted to her calm nature and her awareness of the ordinary world and her keenness for objects. She had brilliant recall for names of flowers and trees and different types of grasses and of course for all the parts of a saddle. I was also quite lonely, and twice a week in the evenings, when I had finished work, we met at a local restaurant where we indulged in warm food and soft conversation that usually circled around our days and my sore muscles and the house that she would build someday. She wanted a two storey with twin dormers and, of all things, a rose window. We never spoke of our deeper thoughts or the nature of death or what would become of our physical bodies in heaven, perhaps because this did not appeal to her. I was her sole interest. At the end of the meal, when I had finally finished my helping of mashed potatoes and meat loaf and washed everything down with a cold glass of milk, she pushed her long dark hair back behind her ears, and then reached across the table to clutch my hands.

She was 18 and was looking for a man who might help her escape her father’s grasp, and though she was all manner of warmth and desire and she let me nibble at her body, only once, in a flurry of passion, did she unbuckle and kiss me. She was confused by my thoughts and often said, “I don’t know who you are, Arthur.”

My brother Bev was in a hospital in Edmonton at the time, he’d suffered a breakdown, for this is the term my mother used, and on Sunday afternoons Dorothy and I visited him. And it was there that I saw Dorothy come alive in a manner that she never was with me. On one of our visits, my mother had sent along cupcakes and we ate these and drank pop and my brother talked. He had discovered God. He admitted that he was clearly a sinner, but he had been forgiven. Dorothy leaned forward and touched his hand and said that this was amazing. Driving back to home later she slid over and leaned her small head against my shoulder, and she talked about Bev’s penitence.

“Like Raskolnikov,” I said. “Only he doesn’t have Nietzsche’s sense of Superman. In the end he’s still just Bev Wohlgemuht.”

She didn’t know Raskolnikov and she didn’t ask. She became thoughtful. She kissed my cheek. This bothered me, that I could insult her in an underhanded sort of way, and then she would forgive me by showing affection. She said, “I’d marry you, Arthur. In a jiffy.”

“Why?” I asked. She began to cry. I wrapped my free arm around her and said sorry and I added that I too would marry her, I just had to first get rid of some wanderlust.

“What do you mean?”

“I have to go away. Just for a while.”

“Why?”

“I will die otherwise.”

I knew then that we could not last.

The plan was that I would be gone for a year, rid myself of my wanderlust, and then return to marry Dorothy and we would settle down in Tomorrow, Alberta, where we would live lives of somnolent satisfaction and eventually die of old age. When I kissed Dorothy goodbye and was finally in the air, I was so relieved to be gone from her that I wrote her a letter telling her how much I missed her. I folded this brief letter and...
placed it in an envelope and tucked it into my brief-case, made from steer hide, a dark brown satchel that I had designed and sewn.

And then I took out another piece of paper and wrote a letter to Isobel, my adopted cousin.

Dear Isobel,

The period of falling in love is surely the most interesting time, during which from every encounter, from every glance of the eye, one fetches something home, like the bird which in its busy season fetches one piece after another to its nest and yet constantly feels overwhelmed by the great wealth at its disposal.

This from the unsurpassable Kierkegaard. I love it. And want to capture it. Along with the truer emotions that enter later: melancholy, desperation, longing. The sense of if only.

I imagine writing a novel in the style of Flaubert or Stendhal, a Bildungsroman that will be from the perspective of a young man who grows up in the provinces and runs away to Paris where he falls in love with an older woman.

I have a new briefcase, a beautiful possession that holds my other possessions within it, and I will sling it over my shoulder and stroll the boulevards of Paris. I plan to purchase a silk foulard.

Love, Arthur.

I had arranged, via letters and halting telephone conversations that took place in broken French and English, to live with a family named Godbout (Carmine et Pierre et leur petit fils Christian) in the suburb of Rueil-Malmaison. Nous habitons en banlieu, Carmine wrote in one of her letters, and I dutifully translated this with the help of my French-English dictionary, discovering that I would be living in the suburbs, a long metro ride from the centre of Paris where the centre of the world existed. I discovered that the Godbout house was not far from the Château de Malmaison, the summer house of Napoleon's first wife, and upon learning this I was amazed and moved. I knew that Julien Sorel had been very fond of Napoleon, had even seen him in real life, and given that I was modelling myself in a slight way after Monsieur Sorel, one of Stendhal's greatest creations, I believed that providence had led me to Rueil-Malmaison.

The connection to the Godbout family came about by chance. A distant cousin of mine, Greg, who worked at a school in the Black Forest, in Germany, came home on holiday and one Sunday, eating lunch at our house, my mother said that I had unrealistic dreams to
live in France. She chuckled, as if this were far-fetched and impossible, and just one more impractical dream that her youngest son harboured. Greg didn’t see it as far-fetched. He said that he knew a couple in France who were looking for an English speaker, a young man preferably, who could teach their 8-year-old son. And so I made contact with Pierre and Carmine, and the chips began to fall into place, and the arrangements were finalized. In one of her letters Carmine wrote, “I am happy to know that you grew up in a religious home. That is important. We want our son to be influenced by someone wholesome.”

Carmine was an anxious woman with a thin face and smooth arms who always dressed as if she were waiting for something grand just around the next corner. I never saw her in anything but dresses of various subdued colours, or blouses and skirts, of which my favourite was night-green and pleated, verging on too short. Her hair was dark, and when streaks of grey appeared, she resorted to applying a medium brown dye that accented her dark eyes. She had some Tunisian blood in her. She wore flat shoes, alternating between black and brown, and the shoes were always dully polished. She was a very conservative dresser. Her husband, Pierre, was often absent. He worked for an aid agency and traveled in sub-Saharan Africa. Eventually it became a habit that once a week, when Pierre was travelling, Carmine invited me to eat dinner with her and Christian, the son, who was polite and timid and quite intelligent, though he was prone to mixing up his personal pronouns when speaking English. We always ate late, à peu près neuf heures, and Carmine insisted we speak English for her sake, and for the sake of Christian, though her rule was often broken, and so I became immersed in the pitter patter of their language, which was often centred around the domestic. After dinner, Christian took a bath while Carmine and I remained at the table and drank espresso. Christian called often from the bath, asking for help with the shampoo, or a toy, or the soap, or he wondered if Arthur was toujours là, and then Carmine remonstrated in her soft gentle fashion, calling out “of course Arthur is still here,” and every time my name fell out of her mouth, I marvelled. Eventually, we finished with a pousse-café, and then said goodnight.

I lived behind the main house in a small coach house that was furnished and self-sufficient. There was a kitchen, a bath, a small dining area with a terrace, and a bedroom with a double bed covered with a white spread. I had carried with me, in my large cloth suitcase, my favourite books, and these I placed on the shelves in the dining area. When I was lonely, and I was often lonely, I looked to these books for comfort, though at some point I understood that human company could never be replaced by the stories I had come to love as a young boy. This saddened me, and made me wonder if I was losing touch with the world of art.

I took the RER to Paris every morning at seven a.m., walking from the house to the station, often in a rain that that autumn was ubiquitous. The women on the train put on their makeup, spreading out complete kits on their narrow laps, and the men read newspapers. Nobody on the train made eye contact, and so I rode, often standing, looking down at the people in a strange country that I had fallen in love with from a distance. I noticed that most of the women had dandruff, and that the men often wore trench coats with dirty collars. I was taller than most of the men and though this gave me a sense of physical superiority, I believed that I would never be able to match a French man’s intellectual breadth. They had studied Latin in school. I hadn’t. They read Le Figaro and Le Monde while I paged through the International Herald Tribune. Eventually I took to slipping the Tribune inside the covers of Le Monde so as to give the appearance of someone who, though foreign, was prepared.

For three hours every morning, five days a week, I studied at Alliance Française. There were nine of us in the class. I was the only male. Our teacher, Madame Flamand, was a sallow-faced woman in her late thirties who wore bright red and yellow blazers, and she stood like a sun within the circle that her students, the planets, formed. She leaned forward and beat the words into us, her spit landing on our faces and shirts. The women in the class were all older than me, hailing from Venice and Barcelona and Budapest. They were chattels of their husbands, whose companies had lent them to French businesses, and all of them, save for Helena, who came from Rome, were indifferent to their studies. Several times, because she asked me
and because I had nothing better to do for lunch, I ate a ham and cheese croissant and drank an espresso with Helena at a café near the school. She wore black leather pants and a fur stole and as we sat and smoked Marlboros she told me in a mixture of French, Italian, and English, with Italian predominating, about her husband, the businessman, who had “forced” her to live in the land of Gaul. She said that I was giovane and bellissimo. The o in bellissimo was round and full, like the o of her brightly coloured mouth as she released the vowel. She was bored with her life, and though I might have been a distraction, I was a minor distraction, someone to be tossed aside when something better came along. This would be a swarthy athletic looking man whom I mistook for her husband, Felice. He picked her up from the coffee shop in his Mercedes, rolled down the window and waved, and she unwrapped her legs and stood and gathered her purse and fur, and bent to kiss me once, twice, three times, and then swayed off, her buttocks moving through her leather pants like the flanks of a horse.

I rode the RER back to Rueil-Malmaison after lunch and from three to six p.m. I taught Christian. We studied in the drawing room of the large house while Carmine moved above and around us. I was, like Christian, constantly aware of her presence, and of the scent of her, at times a very subtle hint of tobacco, which indicated that she had stepped outside to smoke a Gauloise.

I was not a teacher and therefore my methodology was based on curiosity rather than rigour, and so Christian and I spent time playing games and conversing, and for an hour each day I would read to him from the novels of my youth, Hemingway and London. Sometimes, when I felt that he might imagine me as lazy and incompetent, we worked on memorizing verbs.

Sometimes, when I felt that he might imagine me as lazy and incompetent, we worked on memorizing verbs.

I envied him his life, the habitude, his composure at such a young age, the practice of greeting his mother with a kiss every afternoon when he returned from school. He called out maman, sought her out, and he approached her and they kissed, once, twice, and then exchanged niceties about their mornings. Whenever I observed this, for there were days when I would be sitting with Carmine in the kitchen as I attended Christian, I felt a commotion in my chest, and a longing for a mother who wore dully polished flat shoes and simple dresses and sometimes a too-short skirt, and who, because she trusted me, would reveal herself.

Christian was very sheltered. He had not travelled, save to Bretagne to visit his maternal grandmother, and he knew nothing of the Great Plains, or of the Rockies, and he had never milked a cow or sat on a horse or held a gun. He loved stories of cowboys and so I told him about breaking horses and I drew for him a horse and labelled its parts, just as I had done so many years ago for my art teacher, Miss Chou, and I told him the story of Moby, my American quarter horse stallion, who had fallen and broken his leg and was shot by my brother.

Christian was so impressed by this story that he asked me to retell it on one of those evenings when his father was out of town and his mother had invited me to join them for dinner, environ twenty-one hours. Carmine, who saw in me the opportunity to practise her execrable English, tended to jumble the two languages so that she ended up speaking a mélange that, if kept brief, was comprehensible. I told the story once again, aware of Christian’s excitement not so much for the narrative this time, but for his mother’s response. As I spoke he kept looking at his maman and waiting for her to nod or exclaim or laugh, and not surprisingly she did all of these things, not because the story was brilliant or terribly interesting, but because Christian expected it of her.

When I was done, she said, “This is why you walk with a limp.” She said it in French and I understood everything except for the word clodiner, and so she demonstrated, standing and walking around the table with a slight push off her right leg. Christian thought this was wonderful and he too stood and imitated his maman, who was imitating me, who had been, in a sparkling water from green bottles that were stored in rows in the refrigerator.
subconscious manner, imitating Philip Carey from *Of Human Bondage*. I had read the book as a boy and had experienced the innocent heartbreak of an innocent, and up until I was older I called Mr. Maugham Mog-ham, and then there came the day when my English teacher introduced a writer called Maugham and I raised my hand and said that it was Mog-ham, not Maugham, and our teacher, Mr. Suderman, with his crewcut and his thin jaw and his distaste for curriculum, told the class that indeed, from now on it would be Somerset Mog-ham, because Mr. Arthur Wohlge- muht had pronounced it so.

And now, here was Carmine, hobbling around the table, on which there were the remains of a baguette and three different cheeses, and a compote, and several untouched *patisseries* that we were about to take with our coffee, and the sensations I experienced at that moment were conviviality and shame and joy, all three, of which the greatest was joy, because in imitating my walk, Carmine had become a part of me, she had entered my physical self, and the image of her skirt pressing against her thighs, and her hip jutting out, and her stockinged feet, for she had removed her shoes for dinner, left me with a warmth in my heart that bordered on ecstasy.

She paused, and touched my shoulder lightly, near the left clavicle, and she said, almost mournfully, “Je suis désolé, Arthur. Je plaisante.”

I motioned grandly with my arms, taking in Carmine and Christian and the room we were in, and I said it was like theatre. “I do,” I said, “I limp.” Here I used the French word, with what I hoped was the correct conjugation, and she smiled.

“The horse,” she said, “This is sad.”

“It is. It was mine from when I was very young.”

“Children receive horses, where you live?”

“On the ranch. Though most children, like Christian, have never touched a horse.”

“Pierre likes a lot the Westerns,” she said.

“Films?”

“Yes, and books. He thinks if he is a cowboy, he will carry a six shooter.” She smiled and shook her head.

I was handsome. I had gained some weight during my time working back home, and my arms were stronger, in fact my forearms were muscular and when I wore T-shirts, I was aware of people noticing my forearms, though no one remarked outright, except for Carmine, who had one time, in the evening, perhaps after she had had too much wine, said that she admired the veins on the insides of my forearms, how they stood out in relief, or something like that. I did not understand every word and she may, in fact, have been talking about how her own arms were tired of holding her child and her husband and that she was envious of my freedom, my strength, and this is when she motioned at my arms. Or perhaps she was talking about my naïveté, which she mistook for strength, the brave move to Paris, the individual as hero.

Carmine and I became fond of each other, or she might have simply been lonely and she saw me as a companion with whom she could converse at a deeper level than she could with Christian, or even with Pierre, who was a bit of a philistine. We watched television together on Friday evenings, and one Friday, while Christian was in his bath, she invited me to watch a film with her on television. It was *Claire’s Knee*, by a director called Eric Rohmer, whom I had of course never heard of. Carmine and I sat side by side on the couch. She crossed her legs and palmed her skirt and explained that she had seen this film before and she loved it. “It’s about nothing really, except the desire of one man to touch the knee of the girl he adores. In fact, the man adores women in general, *et alors* the knee is a stand-in for all women.” I did not understand everything she said, particularly the word for *stand-in* and so I asked her to explain, which she did once more, using the words *replacement* and *symbol*. This I understood.

The film was like nothing I had ever seen in my short life as a moviregoer. There was no violence, no fighting, no great movement of plot or story, just a man who falls in love with a 16-year-old girl named Laura, and then falls in love with Claire, the stepsister of Laura. I was struck by the beauty of the girls and the beauty of the background in the film, the lake and the hills behind the actors as they spoke. The man who was in love with these two sisters, and who was in fact engaged to be married to a third woman, said that, “Every woman has her most vulnerable part. For some it is the nape of the neck, the waist, the hands. For Claire, in that position, in that light, it was her knee.”
Carmine tried to explain this concept to me in a more elementary French and as she did so I watched her mouth because it was easier to comprehend when I saw the movement of her mouth. At that moment Christian called out from upstairs, and as Carmine left the room I was aware of the hole in the heel of her right stocking, and that the stoop of her back (she was wearing a sweater that was quite rumpled) made her appear older. When she returned she sat once again beside me and as she pulled at the hem of her skirt she became younger again.

While she had been gone the film had of course kept playing and though I caught a few words here and there, I did not understand much, but that did not seem to matter, as the characters in the film spoke and moved in a way that allowed me to grasp that all of them were full of want and indecision and desire.

Carmine said that Jerôme, the man who loved all the women, was a bit vulgar and not to be trusted. She gave a mock shudder and said that she did not like him, but she said it in a jaunty manner and so it seemed that she might in fact like him. It was confusing. Later back in my room, in my overwrought manner, I thought about Carmine’s most vulnerable part, certainly her neck, and about the film itself, about how nothing truly happens, and yet everything under the surface is in turmoil. Like the surface of the ocean, which appears to be calm, and yet beneath there are fish who are eating each other and swimming in schools, and there are whales and sharks and stingrays and all kinds of bloodletting.

For the most part, except during the weekday afternoon hours when I was teaching English to Christian and taking him to museums or reading with him or playing Monopoly or Scrabble, I was alone. At noon, walking back from the metro to the house, I stopped in for a coffee and a croissant at a local café, and then I picked up a fresh baguette at a boulangerie, and this would be my dinner, which I would eat alone, at the small table in the kitchen. The overhead light was fluorescent and it hummed and the light it gave was blue and bleak, and so I bought a small table lamp, and within the light that the lamp offered, I broke my bread and opened a little jar of confiture, and I cut some Gouda, and I ate slowly, prolonging the hour, sometimes writing, sometimes reading.

I was attempting to read Flaubert’s letters to Louise Colet. They were of course in French and I slowly translated them, transposing them back and forth, so that by the seventh time, I had memorized various letters and could write them out verbatim in the original. This was my manner of acquiring another language. Because I was a visual learner I did not easily pick up speaking. In fact, I did not understand what someone was saying until I had seen it written. In the beginning I translated literally. When my professor at Alliance leaned in and spat the question Qui? five times into my face, all I could imagine was the key that opened a door. And so, alone in my room, I took great pleasure and comfort in plodding through Flaubert, sometimes managing to translate two or three sentences in one evening.

I was writing letters home to Dorothy, who would then pass them on to my mother. And I was working at writing stories. Ever since my great success in middle school, when I had won a short story contest in which I had imitated another writer, I had dabbled at writing, but now, here in Paris, I was determined to find my way as a writer, to move beyond dabbling, and to produce work that was original and full of force. It was difficult, but there were brief moments when I descended into art and believed that I had produced something worthwhile, even if that might be a paragraph or two. By the end of the evening, after hours of writing, my back was sore and my fingers stiff. As a reward I would make a coffee and then sit on the terrace in the cold, and drink the coffee and smoke a Marlboro. I would watch the lights in the Godbout residence, and slowly they would go out, first downstairs, and then finally the upstairs bedroom, and I would imagine Carmine undressing and slipping into a chemise and lying down on her back and thinking of me. When Monsieur was home, I did not think of her.

I thought about Carmine’s most vulnerable part, certainly her neck.
The Best Place to Be

by Victor Carl Friesen

The rooming house had a wide front porch, dingy white with a vivid green trim. Inside were two doors, one leading into the house proper, where Mr. Karmy, the landlord, lived; the other to a scant passageway with high, narrow steps ascending to the upper floor.

Once inside, Mrs. Bergen, a new tenant, put down her two suitcases and knocked at the first door. Getting no answer, she proceeded through the second doorway and up the strange stairs—one suitcase held in front, the other behind—to what would be her quarters that coming winter. She panted at the top—she was not as young, or as slim, as she used to be—and looked around. A long strip of linoleum ran the length of the upper hall, darkest beside the baseboards from repeated waxings but without the years of wear the centre had received. Scrolls of dust and lint lay there. At the far end was a half bath.

Her suite (so-called, but really only two small rooms joined by an open doorway) was on the left, and she entered. It was quite dark: the drapes were drawn and there was no light switch at the door. When she pulled the looped dangling string from a ceiling bulb, she was relieved. The room had been freshly painted, albeit an unbecoming purple, and the floor was tiled. As she took stock of the furnishings—a faded-wine sofa bed with matching chair and a heavily enamelled TV table and chest of drawers (that green again)—she heard her son-in-law stumbling up the stairs. He was completing her move with a double armful of belongings, growling to himself over the awkward steps and his huge load.

Although he lived in the city, she had not wished to impose upon him in this manner, but there was no one else to call (her own sons were far away). When she handed him a few dollars, with thanks, for “everything,” he replied with a kind of gruff gallantry.
that he did not want her money, and left.
She slumped down on the sofa and gave way to a sudden burst of tears: he shouldn’t think that she wanted this either, a life in the city, but she could not stay on the farm during winters now that her husband had died—and she needed a paying job. She recovered quickly and began unpacking. Better to be busy, she reminded herself.

Then she remembered she had another room. It was extremely narrow—an electric range with burners of wire coils in porcelain, and some counter space at one end. There was no sink. As she turned to complete her examination, she swung out her arms and touched both walls, confirming the kitchen’s cramped space, and saw an outmoded chrome dinette set and what must be the clothes closet built into the other end. She liked the coziness of it all.

An “Ah-hum!” in the hallway announced someone’s coming, and she stepped back into the first room to see a grizzled old man enter, without knocking. She was a head taller than he.

“You Mizza Berge?” he asked in a thick voice. He did not pronounce the final \( n \). “Your daughter she say on the phone you come.” He shuffled to the sofa and sat down.

It was her turn to say something. She quickly appraised her landlord’s appearance: his swarthy face, prominent nose, rheumy grey eyes—maybe he did not see too well. “I’ve got the rent money right here,” she assured him and handed it over.

“What you doing, Mizza Berge?” he wanted to know, for he was a gracious person. She shook her head—no.

He remained sitting, as though he might like to stay for a short visit, then thought better of it, and got up to leave. Another “Ah-hum!” was his farewell. She noted his clean shirt and trousers—the trousers much too large for him, about the waist and in length. But he wore suspenders, and the pant legs hung in folds over his felt slippers.

She went on with her unpacking, slowly now, looking fondly at each item she had brought from the farm, and tucking them all away in drawer, cupboard, and closet. It had been a trying day, and after she fixed something for supper she ate very little. Seeking the comfort of the sofa, she leaned back and began weeping quietly. Finally, she fell asleep, still sitting there, and awoke after midnight. Not wanting to disturb anyone by trying to open the unfamiliar sofa bed, she got her quilt and pillow and lay on top for the night. She had had her first day in the city.

The next morning she was up early: she had decided to scrub out her entire suite. A kitchen chair was strong enough and the walls low enough that she could wash the ceilings, too. Finding an old pail underneath the sink in the bathroom, she was soon scrubbing away. The kitchen floor, she noticed, was really a badly-worn linoleum, painted over and decorated with a sponge dipped into a different colour of paint—a kind of feathery effect, something she had done for her farm kitchen years ago. She was beginning to love this little room, and she worked all the harder.

Mr. Karmy’s “Ah-hum!” was his signal that he was at her door again and would come in without knocking. “What you doing, Mizza Berge?” he wanted to know. “Come, see,” she called.

He stuck his head around the doorway and saw her working down on her knees. He waved his hand in a half-admiring, half-uncomprehending dismissal, and walked away.

She, triumphant, decided she would get at the hallway as well.

A few days later Mrs. Bergen told herself she should see something of the big city before she started looking for a job in it. Maybe she would feel more at home by then—she did not admit that she was simply putting off her search a day or two.

Even “doing” the city was a little scary. She thought she might catch a bus uptown, but just how to do so she was not quite sure, having never ridden on one before. She came to one bus stop in a little business area, but since she was standing back from the curb the bus went whizzing by. She looked after the vehicle, envying the people inside, and decided that she would walk—her landlord had told her which direction to take. The distance was only two miles; she had sometimes walked farther than that, carrying produce to town.
For a stoutish woman in her mid-fifties, the constant roar of traffic and unfamiliarity of surroundings proved wearing, however, and she reached her destination exhausted. Glad to sit down on a bench, to rest and collect her wits, she knew she could not walk back, but after a respite of watching all kinds of people go by—she enjoyed that—she felt like browsing through some stores. She would worry about returning to her suite later.

Meanwhile, she was paying close attention to this bus business whenever she came to a stop and eventually thought she had things figured out. She continued her window shopping, feeling more relaxed. When she finally boarded a bus, she felt quite citified, looking out and seeing others walking.

She was elated with herself on reaching the rooming house again and had to tell Mr. Karmy about the time she had had. He was absently playing solitaire in his small front room (his bedroom behind was no larger, so that his living quarters were even smaller than hers) and listening to the hourly news on the radio—he never missed a broadcast. It was repeating the same news he had heard the hour before, something he was not fully aware of. “The world is going crazy,” he said. He could not catch her excitement.

She climbed up the awkward stairs then, pausing halfway up, realizing that she was tired again. She listened to her radio, too, sometimes, but she switched it on after the news just to get the “weather”—not to know what it was like in the city (she had just been out in it) but to learn what conditions were out at her farm, eighty miles away. When she opened her sofa bed later that evening, she thought how nice it was to rest her weary bones. She had often felt that way on the farm.

The next morning she was her rejuvenated self and chose to travel the buses all day, having learned how to transfer from one route to another. Her daughter would soon see that she could look after herself all right. Tomorrow she would try to get a job.

It was not that easy. Of gregarious nature, she felt suited to be a sales clerk in some department store, but managers, one by one, turned her down, some keeping her name on file, others saying outright that they would want someone younger if there were an opening. She pursued this tack for several days, finding on returning to her rooming house on late afternoons that the steps seemed to be higher and narrower each time.

And yet there were elderly women selling things in the stores. When Mrs. Bergen next saw one—pleasant, white-haired, and older than she—she asked her about how she had got her job. “Oh, I’ve been working here forty years. I started as a young girl, but the way things are now, I might be laid off anytime.”

Mrs. Bergen departed, wiser but still without work.

When she explained her situation to another woman at church the following Sunday (Mrs. Bergen had begun attending for the sociability), that woman told her about trying “daywork”—housecleaning, washing, ironing, what have you. In fact, the woman had one such job that very week but had to be away. Maybe Mrs. Bergen would like to do it this time. She certainly would.

The daywork was at one of the finest homes in the city. Mrs. Bergen arrived early, somewhat awed and not quite knowing what to expect. The lady of the house, alerted that she would be having a new worker, eyed her up and down coldly, then told her the duties for the day. There were several “Now don’t do it that way” admonitions.

Mrs. Bergen tried her best to do things correctly and plunged ahead. By noon she had got a lot done, and she was getting hungry. Since she had been told that a lunch would be provided, she was taken aback when her employer appeared and asked, “You won’t want anything to eat, will you?”

Mrs. Bergen might have said, “Well, a little something would be nice,” but the way the invitation was put, if invitation it was, made her reply that, no, she would rather keep on working—there was a lot yet to do. (It was, after all, her first “job.”)

That evening she sat at her kitchen table, looking, with some pride, at her few dollars earned, but she found she was too tired to eat—though not to drink. She was on her seventh cup of tea when again she heard the familiar “Ah-hum!” of her landlord’s voice, followed by a knocking at her door. (She had insisted,
a few days earlier, that he not come barging in—she might be in her slip or whatever, and so now he knocked and waited, still preceding this formality with his accustomed “Ah-hum!”

“You want a bat?” he asked. She had been there exactly a week, and he knew she had been working all day.

She hesitated to answer. She had been taking sponge baths all along, using a large basin she concealed behind the stove. But to sit in a hot tub would be relaxing, and she did not wish to reject this hospitable offer; only renters on the ground floor made use of his full bathroom.

So she went down and looked over the situation. The tub had not been scrubbed out for some time, and she did not want to sit in that. But, tired as she was, one more chore of housekeeping would not hurt her this once. She cleaned it out—the landlord across the hall thinking she was taking her bath—then returned upstairs. To please Mr. Karmy, she would come down every week to make splashing noises, but she would not bathe there nor clean the tub again.

With one day’s work now behind her, Mrs. Bergen thought, well, it’s a start. Next morning she placed an advertisement in the city paper that she was available for daywork. Telephone calls brought her an assortment of off-and-on jobs. “You coming and going all de time,” Mr. Karmy told her. She was beginning to get used to the stairs.

One day she came back to find him standing on the porch roof while two men bent over, engaged in shingling it. Now what would he want up there?—maybe some company, she thought, but she was frightened, just looking at him. One of the workers, exasperated, was saying, not unkindly, “Get out of here, old man. You’re gonna fall off andkill yourself, and then what’ll you do!”

He clambered down, and she followed him into the house, relieved that he was safe. “Waddya know?” he asked.

“You must have been a sailor man,” she said half-teasingly to hide her concern. She was still a little shaken. “Up there in the clouds.”

“I was farmer,” he rejoined.

“Wh-what are you doing here then?” she wanted to know, surprised. They were sitting in his room now.

And he told her. “Oh, my boys, four of dem. Dey want to leave, but den, where I go? My wife, she’s died. I want my boys stay. I say, ‘No! I leave. You take farm. I go city.’ So . . . ,” his voice trailed off.

So . . . he was running this rooming house, she finished the story in her mind, in his eighties! If he had been a sailor, she mused, he would have been a captain. “Don’t your sons visit you—or write?” She was writing to her sons all the time, she said; she liked nothing better than reading what they were up to.

“I not write,” he said.

“But you read,” she answered, knowing that he frequently went through the newspapers.

“Ah, a liddle.” He was not going to brag about that. “Why don’t you write them now? I’ll write,” she said.

Thus, Mizza Berge got another job, unpaid of course: being scribe for her landlord. She did not mind. The first letter to the sons was quite a reprimanding one—“making their ears full,” as Mr. Karmy said, but she dutifully wrote it down exactly as dictated. When after some weeks no reply came, she suggested writing another. “Say something about what you do here,” she said. This was a more interesting letter, and at the end she added, without his knowing, a PS—“I was only kidding last time.”

Two weeks later, on her coming back from daywork, Mr. Karmy was waiting for her: “I got ledder.” He waved it about. He was happy for another reason. The grocery store in the nearby “little business area” had a sale on bread, and he had bought a dozen loaves.

“But you have no fridge,” she said. “They’ll mould.”

“Lotsa bread, lotsa bread!” For him, it was still the staff of life.

Mrs. Bergen’s own life continued as before. She had been in the city a month. When she was not writing letters, for her landlord or to her sons, she telephoned or visited her daughter. The daughter was a headstrong girl, but she herself had her own strong will. Each over time had learned the boundaries of her territory, and now they got along fine. She liked her son-in-law, too, but sometimes he worked too hard.

On her days off, and they came fairly often, she wandered about the shopping malls or sat in a plaza, observing the passersby—so many people, so many
lives. On occasion, she took in an old movie at the rundown theatre in the little business area with her neighbour across the hallway, a sweet young thing, recently married, who had got a job as a clerk in a downtown drugstore. Too bad the girl was often by herself, for her husband was a salesman, away most of the week. Once at the theatre, by herself this time, she had fallen asleep from sheer tiredness and awakened to an empty half-lit building. She rushed up the aisle to find the manager mopping up the litter from departed moviegoers. “I knew you were there,” he said; “I thought I’d let you sleep till I was finished.”

Sometimes when no one had called about work, she just sat, relaxed, on her sofa, thinking of the old days on the farm, the best place to be, the little one-horse holding she and her husband had owned (and that she, unlike her landlord, still had). Serious-minded, her man had been the right match for her—she was too impulsive, she knew. Ah, the farm. No wonders of the city there, no electricity, no running water, just their family around them, growing up. She thought of her sons: the obedient, oldest one in police work—a fitting job, for sure; the middle son, so much like her, dead—she wouldn’t get over that, and yet . . . ; the youngest, the dreamer, now at university—she had high hopes there. So many nice memories to live with the older she got . . . life always changing . . . only inside the head they stayed fresh. She liked to live in the past—when she was not caught up in the present.

The present, meanwhile, was very much a concern. Two incidents that happened in midwinter made her look for a new job. One occurred when she found herself working for an obliging, neatly-groomed, elderly widower. Almost at the end of her workday, he appeared before her, smiled his oily smile, and announced: “I’ve been watching you, my dear, and I think you’re the kind of woman I want.” She broke into a cold sweat. What was his meaning? “Oh, I don’t think so,” she countered, rather vaguely. “My son,” she lied, “is waiting for me already. I really must go.” And she looked at the kitchen clock. “Is your time right?” Getting the situation under control now, she asked for her pay and casually left with a little wave of her hand. She would never go there again.

There seemed to be a lot of lonely people in the city. The other occasion was more frightening only when she thought about it later. She had been called to do some cleaning up at a house where a lot of guests had just left. She was finishing her own supper after working all day and hardly felt like going out again, but she had not turned down a job so far. Was there a bus line nearby, she wanted to know. Not really, was the reply; they’d pay for her cab. It turned out that the address was on the outskirts of the city, and there were no lights on when she arrived. She explained her reason for coming to the driver. “Lady, I wouldn’t go in there if I were you,” he advised. “Looks a little creepy.”

Yes, but she had promised to come, and it wasn’t her way to back down. Telling him not to leave, she rang the doorbell, listened for some movement, knocked, waited, and then returned. “I guess it’s back to where I came from.”

“Sure, lady,” he said, the fare mounting up, but when he stopped, he insisted—“Look, lady, I had to come back any- way—a half-fare is good.”

Upstairs once more, she almost felt like saying “Home, Sweet Home,” but didn’t. She’d have a few more bites and another cup of tea, though. There were nice people in the city (just maybe some not so nice).

She waited a day before she started her new job search. And she knew exactly what she was looking for—waitressing. Why hadn’t she thought of it before? A small café in the little business area was within walking distance. She would try there first. For once she was in luck—of a sort.

The owners—two young men, recent immigrants—needed a dishwasher, someone to work in the kitchen late weekday afternoons and perhaps evenings, depending on how busy they were. The two of them, cousins, so boyishly conscientious about making good, reminded her of her own sons, and she took to them at once. The feeling seemed to be mutual: she could start later that very day. On her leaving, they enunciated her name again carefully. To her ear it sounded like “Meesis Bairgen,” and the flair with which they said it in their Old Country way made it sound like a compliment.
After months of going from home to home, Mrs. Bergen found a specific job at one location pleasant. Before her was a huge sink piled high with pots and pans, cutlery and dishes, and she knew what she had to do—get busy: no complicated directions here, nor irksome appliances. This was her kind of work; she immediately showed how eager and competent she was.

The young men liked to have an elderly woman in the kitchen: it felt more homey that way. The cousins joshed one another, now that they had an audience, and “Meesis Bairgen” smiled at their antics, or even joined in the fun. Sometimes, working over a pot of soup or stew, one cousin started singing—he had a fine baritone voice, and she thought of her middle son. The songs—“O Sole Mio” was one—had a haunting beauty; Old World songs they generally were, songs she did not know but which gained resonance in the steamy kitchen.

She worked more quietly with the dishes then. So the days and weeks passed. She came to think of the cousins as “her boys,” and they sometimes teasingly called her “little mother.”

All went well in the course of her new employment until one evening when she had to work late. It was near midnight when she left to walk home, a dark night, and thoughts of her previous experience involving the taxi came quickly to her. She walked all the faster to reach her lodging sooner, and when a man appeared across the street, she clutched her purse tightly and strode even faster.

Reaching the porch door, she dug into her bag for her key and could not find it. What a time to have forgotten it, and she began pounding on the door to awaken Mr. Karmy—there was no bell. She would have called out but might have caught only the attention of some passing ne’er-do-well, so she kept on pounding. Why didn’t he come? She pounded some more, and finally she saw his light go on.

“Mizza Berge,” he said, somewhat bemused, as she, excited and scared, exclaimed about her predicament. “You bang so much, I tink you break my door. I have no time to get up.” He was chuckling a bit, and she had to laugh, too.

Weeks turned into months, Mrs. Bergen continuing her café work, and winter was nearing its end. Before one late-afternoon shift, she had her church friend over for tea. “What do you do here?” the friend asked, looking about the tiny accommodation.

“This is home for now,” she replied with forced brightness. The closer it came to spring and her going back to the farm, the easier it was to call her city quarters a kind of “home.”

During the visit, Mr. Karmy’s “Ah-hum!” announced his presence, his knocking and coming in and saying a few words. “He’s like that,” Mrs. Bergen said cheerily, confidingly, after he had gone.

Spring had come at last, and the snow was fast disappearing. Crows were cawing in the elms and chickadees singing their vernal “phoebe” song—just as they would be on the farm. There was a feeling in the air, an excitement, a vitality that affected even people indoors—in, for example, a café in a little business area in a big city and in the kitchen of that café, where two owner-cooks and a dishwasher worked. When one of the young cooks burst into song again, over a pot of soup, the other reached for the hands of the middle-aged dishwasher and waltzed her about the room, amid much laughter.

That day, after work, Mrs. Bergen slipped into her habit of window shopping, for the stores had not yet closed. She was feeling exuberant from the “dance” and her choosing that occasion to give notice that she would be leaving for the farm at the end of the month (she had already told her landlord). Then she saw it, something with which to celebrate the season and her departure—a vase of artificial yellow roses. Flowers would not be up for weeks yet, but here were some that would do in the meantime, also a decoration for her TV table, which had stood empty all winter.

She bought them and, humming “The Yellow Rose of Texas,” rushed “home,” and ran up the stairs to set them down and admire them. She had no sooner done so than she heard Mr. Karmy’s footsteps, quicker than usual, and a loud knocking at the door. There was no “Ah-hum!” this time.

“Who in dere?” he fairly shouted.
Mrs. Bergen opened the door to a surprised landlord.

“You here?” he asked. “Dose wasn’t your steps coming in, running so fast. I tought it was a burglar.”

“Yes, it’s me,” she replied gaily, “only me. Not a burglar.” She had gradually lost weight over the winter months with all her activities and had not realized she was lighter on her feet. “Come, see what I bought,” she continued, “—yellow roses,” and she hummed a bit of her song.

“H-m-m,” he said and bent over to smell them.

“They’re plastic,” she beamed, “no watering, no dying . . . .”

“Mebbe I get some,” he said. They were both in a good mood.

The end of the month came quickly. Mrs. Bergen had counted off the days on her calendar; now she could leave. But she had to say some goodbyes first. Saying farewell to “her boys” at the café was easier than she had thought. They were so jolly, wishing her good health and “bon voyage” and hoping she’d come back to work for them, that she could not but be happy. When they bent over her hand in courtly fashion, she was charmed.

Saying goodbye to Mr. Karmy was somewhat different. He stood in the outer doorway and she on the stoop with her flowers, the two suitcases beside her. He started the conversation.

“Too bad you go,” he said, “but I know—the farm, the farm . . . . Good place to be.”

“I’ve enjoyed it here,” she said.

As she started to say more, he broke in with—“Come back any time. I always got place for you.” His rheumy grey eyes looked directly at her and seemed also to be looking beyond, into the future perhaps. “Next fall, mebbe I see you.”

“Yes, maybe next fall.” But who knew how far along life’s road they’d go—or where?—where anybody would go? She thought of her own life in the past year. “Maybe next fall,” she repeated. “You’ve been good to me.” And without having planned at all to do so, she thrust out the flowers. “Here,” she said, “you take them.”

With that, she patted him on the shoulder, picked up her suitcases, and walked briskly down the street. She could not explain away the pang she felt—life twists the heart so much at times (she should know)—and yet her heart was singing, too. “The farm, the farm”: he knew the feeling—spring, the turning year, coming back . . .

On the bus, a highway bus, with her suitcases stowed safely underneath (her daughter and son-in-law would bring her remaining things on their next visit—and news about Mr. Karmy), Mrs. Bergen now had more time to reflect about her busy city life, how large her world had become. But she was thinking only of the farm—getting water from the squeaky pump at the well and lighting a coal-oil lamp. She had always prided herself on having a small workable hand that could squeeze inside the lamp chimney with some crumpled paper to clean it—that made a squeaking kind of sound, too. Ah, the farm!—that plot of land that would always be her home.

She leaned back, her memories intact, and dreamed of her homecoming. Outside the bus windows, the visible world changed continuously, went streaming by, mile after mile.

‘Yes, it’s me,’ she replied gaily, ‘only me. Not a burglar.’
Flight to Quebec City

by Ian Kent

Red sky,
flesh of the dance,
fading glow of light,
blue expanse,
night shades above
the earth,
crimpled clouds
for feet like mine,
transmutable in rain,
drip, thunder, clap
towards grey tree,
crooked, bending low,
but taller than
the stiff pines.
Wretched its look;
majesty its name.
Artist’s Statement

Since 2009, I have travelled to Havana, Cuba, a city characterized as being frozen in time. When I first walked the dilapidated streets, with every step and every glance I was overcome by the beauty and stillness of the decay and its timelessness. Weathered walls became a natural fixation and gradually my daily walks became a ritual of stopping every few feet to photograph fragments of the fading, layered walls I passed by. The photographs became my sketches. When I had time to take a good look at them upon my return, instead of seeing the antiquated remains of buildings, all I saw were beautiful abstractions and hints of landscape. –Deborah Danelley
Havana Wall 2012 – Brushfire

Deborah Danelley
Pigment ink-jet print,
Hahnemuhle German etching photo rag
26 in. x 30 in.
2012
Havana Wall no. 19
Deborah Danelley
Pigment ink-jet print,
Hahnemuhle German etching photo rag
23 in. x 30 in.
2011

Contexture I
Deborah Danelley
Pigment ink-jet print,
Hahnemuhle German etching photo rag
18 in. x 55 in.
2011
This series was shot on second-hand expired 35mm film. I believe capturing these neglected spaces transforms the space. They are no longer forsaken. In the time it takes to release the shutter, these spaces take on a new life. They become dislodged from their original location and multiplied. Every photograph has the aura of sacredness; it is an act of creation. It is a birth, a creation that constructs a bond between the world, the photographer, and the viewer. – Clint Enns
The Wandering Heart of Cornelius Klassen: Mennonite Cowboy

by Abigail Carl-Klassen

(Excerpts from a long poem inspired by the life of Cornelius Klassen, the author’s father-in-law, who was excommunicated from his Old Colony congregation in the Manitoba Colony, near Cuauhtémoc, Chihuahua, Mexico, in the early 1960s, for being a truck driver who bought and sold heavy equipment that had rubber tires.)

Darp Mechanics: Seminole, Texas, 2008

Cornelius Klassen parked his pop-up trailer in his son’s backyard after he was declared dead for the second time on an operating table in El Paso, Texas, raised, like Christ, ribs thrust upward as he gasped his first breath, again. Popping open his kjnipse Hamd to reveal the incision to his grandchildren. Skin stretched over the thin metal box implanted just beneath the collar bone. A machine, but not like the tractors he used to haul on his semi over the mountains in Chihuahua. And air compressors, diesel engines, anything second hand Dietchas bought at auction. After he got the pacemaker put in, he couldn’t make any more bets with his social security checks. No more scratch offs or pick six, beer or cigarettes, because he wasn’t allowed to drive anywhere (though his son kept tags on his ’85 Cadillac, no air in the tires, just in case he got better). Easy chair slumped, undershirt and boxer shorts. Not knowing his grandson at the Farm Supply would have snuck him Mega Millions, Tall Boys and Swisher Sweets to share in the bag of Big Macs he brought when he dropped by to recite Education of a Wandering Man. Lined across the spine. Pulp westerns stacked on Cornelius’s nightstand. Stories that surprise like the sharp crack of a Winchester and move like the lonely howl of the wind across an empty plain on the long ride home.
Katechismus: oder kurza und einfache Unterweisung, a brief instruction for young people, in the form of questions

and answers. When a brother in the church has made a misstep, how are they to be dealt with? Article 12

Of the Evangelischen Bann. Church discipline. Its withdrawal and application. If he neglects to hear or lives in gross sin,

what should be done with such a person? The Lord Jesus Christ gave to his church the keys of heaven to bind

and set free and commanded that all annoying or vexing and disobedient members of the church should be

banned from his love and the church. In order to improve those who have become separated from the church they must be kept

apart and shunned. In this way they will be ashamed, not for destruction of the banned, but rather, for penance

and conversion of disgraced and crushed hearts. After he has become truly penitent it is sufficient, that he was punished

by many. Kjnals, you better make sure you don’t come back unless you’ve repented in front of the Je’meent and drive out
the Deiwel, the Old Colony Bishop snapped. Preachers and deacons
from the Darp nodded, hushed and unanimous, but fingers still
outstretched in his face, because he said he’d never stop. Driving
semi-trucks to make a living. The third person this year
and it’s only February. Otherwise, you’re going to hell. At least
that’s what they wrote on the paper. And spat
behind his back. Spatsearen in the feed store and the frutería.
Nehferein hisses and Freizeit whispers. Silent
visiting days and Sunday lunches. No Hoonsbrooden or warm
buns. Rhubarb jam, Kjnipsebrat or knocking
zoot. Sugar cubes or bitter coffee. Kjnals was
wiekljerig. Too much for his own good. The Lord will hold him
accountable for what he knows. Somebody should have
snapped his will. A strong rod. A submissive child. Everyone knows
he’s selling tractors with rubber tires. He spent too much
time in Mexa shops and bars. Worldly women who left
their hair uncovered. His wife at home. Now it’s too late. He has gone
too far. Das geht zu weit, this rubber tire business. He didn’t
need to read it. Everyone already understood. En Kjokjebaun.
Excommunication. Thrust into his open fist.
Between Juarez and Villa Ahumada, Cornelius ran out of gas. Again. Alone in his sleeper he watched honest Abe get sucked into the Wicked Winnings slot machine. Just one last time. Before he warmed up the semi’s diesel engine. Logged his load and headed south toward Cuauhtémoc. Toward crisp apples and warm bread. Ten pairs of feet. Bare for the summer but soon in stockings and boots for the harvest and hog boiling. Except the pig pen was empty this year. Only a few old hens. Tired mare struggling to pull the cart to Saturday market. No noise on the CB until the next morning. Palm raised against the sun. Scouting the expanse of asphalt in either direction while mirages reverberated beneath the Sierra Madres ¿Adonde vas hermano? El Paso. He waited. Thumb outstretched.

Hungry? Elmer’s Family Restaurant, serving you proudly since 1959, still has the cheapest breakfast in El Paso, $1.99. Eggs, bacon, sausage, hotcakes and an endless cup of coffee. Bring the family and come by for dinner to try our fried chicken platter for only $4.99.

In the mood for something Mexican instead? Our authentic enchiladas verdes have just the right amount of spice. Whatever you choose, top it off with our delicious apple pie and homemade vanilla ice cream. Conveniently located next to the Econolodge on Montana Street. Open late. Truckers always welcome.
**Darp Mechanics, Resurrection: Manitoba Colony, Mexico, circa 2003**

Cornelius’s brother, dressed in white, chips of ice packed beneath his body, waiting, not able to rise until that day when Jesus comes back to the campo. Watching water drip from the end of the coffin, he fingers his excommunication papers in his pocket. The Darp is different now. Mumkjes gossip on cell phones, Mejalles jump on trampolines and preachers drive power stroke diesels. Restaurante La Sierra Thiessen se vende pizza estilo Menonita. Talleres almost every kilometre. Tractopartes Dyck. Maquinarias Friesen. Refacciones Guillermo Peters. Centro de Servicios Fehr. Yonke de Neufeld. Ferretería Casa Rempel. Autos Seminuevos Loewen. Industrias Reimer. Llantera Klassen. Now some young men have even started to work for narco-traffickers. Cash money. American dollars. Fat pockets don’t come from driving trucks or tractors. Two Dietchas tried to unload a truck full of dope at Cornelius’s shop in El Paso. But he shouted, If you don’t get those drugs off my property, I’m going to call the cops. It’s just business, Kjinals. Don’t you want to make money? Cornelius spat. Yes, lots of money, but a very short life. Don’t be afraid of honest work. I already told your boss no. I don’t want to see you here again. At Faspa after the funeral his sister whispers, Kjinals you should try to get your excommunication removed. That way when you die you’ll be, in seelich Soawen, a state of grace. Exiled. Deported. Excommunicated. Mennonites are like ants. We always find the cracks and crawl back up.
Why do you speak such good Spanish?
I was born in Mexico and I lived there my whole life. Until now.
Stop messing around. Where are you from? You don’t look Mexican.
Yes, pure Mexican. From Chihuahua.
Are you f—ing with me?
Seriously, I’m from Cuauhtémoc. Land of the Mennonites.
Mennonites? Like the cheese makers? In overalls?
Yes, but I’m not a cheese maker. I’m a truck driver. I’m much more handsome in these clothes, don’t you think?
Well, you don’t look like a Mennonite either. If you’re a Mennonite what are you doing here in a bar in El Paso?
It’s complicated.
What’s your name?
Say something to me in German.

Translations of Spanish expressions, in order of appearance:

Why do you speak such good Spanish?
I was born in Mexico and I lived there my whole life. Until now.
Stop messing around. Where are you from? You don’t look Mexican.
Yes, pure Mexican. From Chihuahua.
Are you f—ing with me?
Seriously, I’m from Cuauhtémoc. Land of the Mennonites.
Mennonites? Like the cheese makers? In overalls?
Yes, but I’m not a cheese maker. I’m a truck driver. I’m much more handsome in these clothes, don’t you think?
Well, you don’t look like a Mennonite either. If you’re a Mennonite what are you doing here in a bar in El Paso?
It’s complicated.
What’s your name?
Say something to me in German.

What does that mean?
I’ll only tell you if you come with me.
Where are you going, brother?
Sells pizza Mennonite style.
Mechanic shops
Dyck’s Tractor Parts
Friesen’s Machine Shop
Guillermo Peters’s Parts Shop
Fehr’s Service Center
Neufeld’s Junkyard
Rempel’s Hardware House
Loewen’s Used Cars
Reimer Industries
Klassen’s Tire Shop
The Martyrs in the Family Room

by Karen Yoder

From their frames on the wall, Felix, Conrad and Georg stare down solemnly

while I eat Cheetos and watch America’s Funniest Home Videos on TV.

Why Mom hung the martyrs up in the family room is a mystery to me.

Their sombre faces don’t show the irritation they must feel.

What on earth am I doing on my duff starting at the boob tube? I should be

In Sri Lanka with Aunt Kathy in Haiti with Uncle Glenn or in India like Great Uncle Jonathan and Great Aunt Rhea. I stuff the

Last of the Cheetos in my mouth. Hum along with the ending theme song’s upbeat melody:

“You’re the red, white and blue, The funny things you do, America, America, this is you.”

Recycling in the Mennonite Church Parking Lot

by Karen Yoder

White, red dry, sweet.

I recycle furtively, car keys in hand.

In this town, some think one drink makes you alcoholic.

I let go of the keys accidentally; they land in the recycle bin, balancing on a bottle of Riesling.

I throw out the other bottles before calling Dad for help.

On the phone, I bear false witness:

“I was recycling spaghetti sauce jars.”
Your Grandpa’s Viewing

by Karen Yoder

Now with breasts
Hormones to raise your voice
Using the ladies’ room
Instead of the mens’.

Your gangly 6’4” frame
In a blue flowered sundress.

Life more vulnerable
As a female. Dangerous to
Walk the streets of LA
Alone at night.

Your name change: from
Nick to Christine. Your
Boyfriend: a balding lawyer
Twenty years your senior.

Today we’re both here
At your grandpa Paul’s viewing,
In this small town I still live in
Where we dated years ago.

Your grandpa Paul, a pastor,
Didn’t let my husband’s grandma
Teach Sunday school: too worldly
Because she’d cut her hair.

In the receiving line, surrounded,
I talk to you about trivialities:
My husband. Your trip here.
The weather in LA.

I can’t ask you what it felt like
To wake up with breasts and
A vagina. What it felt like to be
The woman after being the man.
Power

by A Non (E) Mouse

Its tear shaped reddish blue evidence lies splattered on the black marble tiles
And the White Whippet passes not silently, not loudly, behind the furniture clouds
There is a difference in the final summation between what is and what is right
There are no ribbons for second place and the boot is on the throat

Lovers and Kings and dreamers and women of mystery do not know the power of broken
You climb you reach you trample you sacrifice and you lose it all to gain it all
And then when you are so desperately broken that the cold steel blade of death
Scorches your soul you begin to feel your first twinge

But not yet

You think you know, You think you feel it as others have but you are a fool
You still have something to lose, something to prove, to protect you do not have it yet
You are smug for a moment and you strut, you proclaim, in words in metaphors
And glances and letters

And you give a little of what you think you have and you take more, you gulp at the river
And you cannot feel shame

The perfectly shaped back of her leg reaches and disappears beneath the layers
And the twill, You follow it, A scent A draw A pull Elusive
You work until you are sick not knowing why you chase the dragon
You can’t stop

[Note: This poem was submitted directly to me. The author wishes to remain a non (e) mouse, but will nonetheless I’m sure get a buzz from seeing the poem in print. –Di Brandt]
Carlsbad, California

by Colin Dodds

It was a foggy night outside San Diego
during the easy days when I rented cars
and saved fast food receipts

The developments all had names like Harbor Pointe
with that extra e, as if they’d been built by the pilgrims
and not in 1994

Detached homes, minimum security condominiums
and the sadness
of owning everything you touch

The physical world
was obeying our wish
withering in variety and importance

The car radio said a lawn mower hitting a rock
could shoot the spark
that sets a whole subdivision ablaze

And I watched for the flicker in the streetlights
for the fatal flaw
in the million dreams come true
Las Flores to Los Angeles, California

by Colin Dodds

The flowers and angels greet you
and the flowers are made of angels
and the angels are made of flowers

Saints urge you up and down the highway
saying everything you do is a good thing
and none of it matters anyway

The Camp Pendleton war copters
prowl the highway, their gun muzzles
like whiskers against the sunset

The AM station warns
of demonic possession and financial conspiracy
desperate for anyone to care

The marine layer postpones the stars
The cars postpone the eyes
Reality Sneaks past like a spy

Hollywood, California

by Colin Dodds

I was hiding in health
among the beloved of Sunset

The pathos and grace in the twisting trunk
of the eucalyptus tree across the street
would shame the tired schtick of this Hollywood bar
if anyone looked

Stars in our eyes and drinks in our hands
we talked over each other
If we couldn’t live the dream
we’d at least like to live the cliché

Everyone wants everything
It’s a hell of a way to run the world
Everyone wants everything
The illusion industry grinds day and night

From George Washington to Squeaky Fromme
we’re all in the movie business now
Los Angeles, California

by Colin Dodds

The twin nothingnesses
of desert and sea
force up a city

A city of traffic, a city of no fixed address
a city like a probability cloud
and a dirty one at that

Among the sterile palms
even a God so shapeless and atheistic
that you can neither escape nor offend It
gives way to pornography on a cell phone

The constant traffic across its sprawl of a face
tells us nothing will be major or minor again
only pleasant or unpleasant

The city billows and swirls
like the new truth, after God
after reality

Santa Monica, California

by Colin Dodds

Cauterized by traffic
I walk from Venice to Santa Monica
seeking intimacy among people
who will do anything for money, except work
I find the relics of Warren Zevon everywhere

In a bar I could give my decades to
the French Inhaler drinks with the barback
and smokes with the cook, reinventing loneliness

She coughs with a high yell
to get someone’s attention
While a drunk girl with a backpack
malingers by the jukebox, somewhere
between panhandling and prostitution

The French Inhaler bumps my hand with her cigarettes
The backpack girl says something about my eyes
something about peace and love
and something about a dollar
Rainy Days

*by Patrina C. Jones*

It rains. It pours.  
Water slides hard  
And fast into too clogged  
Drains, running swiftly  
Into sidewalk cracks,  
Backing up, streaming.  
Puddles verge on overflow.  
Whatever plants and  
Flowers reach harvest,  
This is what they know:  
The end is in sight. A  
New beginning, a new  
Season is in tact, in style,  
The vogue to go to make  
It out, to live it through.  
These are rainy days.

Africa

*by Patrina C. Jones*

Africa was not built in one day. The  
Greatest Civilization will struggle,  
Fail, let go, surrender even, before  
Spawning to overtake a globe not  
Ready or willing. With Providence,  
My people, we will rise again to  
Stand first in the world, and we will  
Do it with dignity, with pride. We will  
Return to the days when our Queens  
Sat down with nations to discuss a  
Life cause. Freedom for all.

To Be

*by Patrina C. Jones*

Shape me on my journey,  
Like a ship awaiting sail.  
Teach me love and wisdom,  
To triumph, to prevail.
Pencil Stub

by Mary Ellen Sullivan

Shyam sits cross-legged
at the rough-hewn bench
holding a pencil stub.

Sharpens it with a razor blade.
Grinds strange letters
into the eraser-thinned paper.

Sudhir’s strong, fine-boned hand
comes to rest on the smaller one.
Relaxes the child’s exertion.

Together their hands
find a serpentine flow
of English words.
A language that might allow
this child’s survival.

Old Jesuit.
You sit against the draft-filled wall
leaning on your cane.
Finger joints bent
in unconventional ways.

A greyish, tired cassock
stretched over your knees,
and your navy Vancouver sweatshirt
sagging at the elbows.

Green garter-stitch scarf
circling your neck,
given by a far-away friend.
A gift to warm
your fluent words.

So many years in this dismissed part
of India.

You could have been so comfortable
teaching privileged students
back in Nova Scotia.

But you sought these uncluttered minds,
found such affection here, a simplicity of trust.
These children who knew
that you were a gift
given to them.

You chose the poverty,
the sacrifice of body.
Knowing the potential,
the sufficiency
of a pencil stub.

Sit with peace
watching your student teach.
Y: Aptonym of Changming Yuan

by Changming Yuan

If the name is not right, the speech will carry no might. –Confucius

Changing or charming
My given name is so often
Misspelt, as my family name
Which is sometimes mispronounced
Intentionally or otherwise,
That the language has definitely
Failed me in this foreign tongue, just
As Confucius warned
Two thousand years ago

Unlike Fairbank
The tremendously rich banker
Unlike Cherish Hart
The particularly famous cardiologist
Unlike Jack Armstrong
Probably the greatest baseball player
Unlike Laura, my loyal lawyer
Or Dennis, your dandy dentist

We have long forgotten
The true name of God,
So our language is bound
To go nowhere except
In a few rare cases for or against
Aptonym

Predicate: A Hypergrammatical Poem

by Changming Yuan

You have to take the form of an action
Static or dynamic
Predicating what the subject does
Or portraying how it is
Within a tense, a mood
Or a voice
Like the human heart that beats
Against the pumping of bloody feelings

Lost

by Changming Yuan

Yellow skinned
Black haired
Brown eyed
Small in stature
Roughly 5,000-year-old
With a deformed
Confucian heart
Clad in a Dao suit
Inside out
Responds to the name of
China or Chinese

Last seen at this crossroads
Jaegering
by Changming Yuan

Hidden in the backyard of
Every heart is a corner of hell
Walled with human feelings

Once you demolish the building
You will readily find heaven
Right above the ruins, which
You may never hope to see, touch
Hear, smell or taste, but where
You can relocate your inner being

And live happily ever after there
As long as you choose to

Listen
by Changming Yuan

Here are the semi-finalists
From all groups participating in
The first contest of sounds:

Fire of guns, cannons and missiles
Tingle of a stream running from Himalayas
Song of orchids in an Emei valley
Hum of a woman being fucked on the beach
Giggle of black toddlers
Chant from a Buddhist temple
Chirrup of birds in Yani's light music
Thundering steps in Beethoven's Ninth

Hark, the world champion of sounds
Is...
**Boundless Energy and Classical Music**

An Interview with Eric Friesen

by Maurice Mierau

Rhubarb: You have dedicated most of your professional life to presenting classical music to audiences on the radio, whether at CBC, Minnesota Public Radio, or now at Golden West in Winnipeg. What is the connection between that impressive career and your Mennonite background, growing up in Altona, Manitoba?

Eric Friesen: Growing up in Altona imbued in me a love of classical music, a love fostered both in our home and in the valuation of high culture among the Russländer. My father was a record collector and my earliest aural memories are of baritone Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau singing Schubert lieder as I was falling asleep. Our house was always filled with recorded music, Arthur Rubenstein at the piano or Bach cantatas on those beautifully packaged Arkiv LPs from Germany. Altona also confirmed my romance with radio, a romance begun before CFAM arrived on the scene, but certainly emboldened by the presence of a radio station in my hometown, and which drew into a small prairie town such interesting and unusual characters as Ben Horch and Leonard Enns.

Rhubarb: Why do you think classical music needs to be on the radio or even streaming on the Internet? What does it do for listeners that other musical forms don’t?

Friesen: Classical music needs to be on the radio and streamed on the Internet as a public validation of its place in our culture. It’s like our national parks system: not everybody uses it, but without its existence something critical is lost in the enrichment of those who want to be part of it. Similarly, art galleries or great architecture or ballet companies or libraries (and bookstores) are there to hold up that which is best in our culture. Remove them, ignore them, abandon them, and our society is mysteriously diminished, even if only five percent of the population participates. My definition of classical music is very simple: it is that music which survives when everything else fades away. Classical music is like all great art, indispensable but vulnerable. It survives to claim the very best of our hearts, minds, souls, and spirits. Without it we are impoverished.

Rhubarb: Sometimes the media runs dismal statistics about the tiny percentage of classical music and jazz (so-called serious music) that’s purchased in any form in North America. And of course symphony orchestras all over the continent are in trouble, as are opera companies and other performing arts organizations involved with classical music. What are your thoughts on how we got into this mess, and how we get out?

Friesen: There are many reasons for the crisis: composers in the twentieth century who abandoned their audience; orchestras failing to change with the times; the corporatization of the arts, from boards to management to unions; the high cost of tickets; governments abandoning their role as arts patrons; the decline of music and arts education in public schools. Now everybody is playing catch-up, and when the money has decreased and the art is marginalized, the challenge is enormous.

There are also many signs of life in classical music and jazz, and you need look no farther than to our own Winnipeg backyard for the seeds of renewal: orchestras that live innovatively within their means, the best
university jazz program in North America, audiences who care and support because it enriches life in a daunting climate, philanthropic generosity, new immigrant communities welcomed into the cultural family, a true sense of community, and above all, really good artistic leadership. Moses led his people out of the wilderness, and good leaders, those who really believe in the art form and for whom it is not just a career, will do the same for the arts.

Rhubarb: You’ve recorded a YouTube video for the Friends of Canadian Broadcasting where you suggest that CBC radio’s future lies with hiring the best and brightest people, and then getting out of their way. How would you assess the way in which CBC radio is moving forward, especially with respect to Radio 2? Are they taking your advice?

Friesen: In a word, no, they are not taking my advice. CBC was always at its best in a slightly anarchist model, where true creative types could somehow make their way despite the best efforts of management to control them. In Radio 2, most of the gifted troublemakers have left, and those that remain are tightly controlled by a visionless management who have lost their sense of mission and are desperate only to survive another fiscal crisis. They have forgotten, if they ever knew, that creative success can only be encouraged, never controlled, never ordered. Radio 1 still has a bit of that old tradition surviving (Jian Ghomeshi, Michael Enright), which is why it still rules.

Rhubarb: What evidence do you see that there might be an ongoing connection between the Mennonite community and classical music, whether in the form of a choral tradition or amateur orchestras? Or is that connection gone?

Friesen: I think Mennonites, like Jews, are still disproportionate carriers of culture in Canada. Some of the cultural richness of Winnipeg can be attributed to the high-culture instincts (and support) of Mennonites. In Winnipeg, it is not uncool to love classical music. It’s no accident that it is in Winnipeg that a new classical radio station is born. In most of the rest of the world, classical radio is either declining or barely holding its own. In Winnipeg, Classic 107 is a beacon of hope not only to Manitoba listeners, but also to classical music lovers everywhere simply by its very newborn existence.

It’s interesting to me that while symphony orchestras everywhere are struggling and even dying, the Winnipeg Symphony Orchestra is having some of the best days of its sixty-five-year history. A lot of this can be credited to its Mennonite executive director, Trudy Schroeder.

Rhubarb: Since you were an English major in college at Waterloo, it’s not surprising that you have kept up connections with the literary world, whether writing for *Queen’s Quarterly* or interviewing writers like Vikram Seth and Ian McEwan. What is the connection
for you between the worlds of music and literature?

Friesen: As a broadcaster, I have spent my professional life trying to describe in words the experience of listening to music. I think it was Martin Mull who coined the phrase, “talking about music is like dancing about architecture.” Exactly. And yet, we who work in the media aspire to do just that. I find inspiration in writers and poets who listen to music and can articulate the mysterious emotional experience that comes only from music, or who can describe a great work in words, as for example Ian McEwan did in his novel *Saturday* about Bach’s *Goldberg Variations*. That enriches my listening in new and wondrous ways, and gives me the courage to keep on trying to find words to describe what music does to me.

Rhubarb: You’ve had a notably vigorous career, between your work as a broadcaster and involvement as a board director for organizations, including the Roy Thomson Hall/Massey Hall, Conrad Grebel University College, and Minnesota Opera, among others. Now you’re on the radio in Winnipeg five mornings a week. What keeps you going?

Friesen: As a Mennonite, I am wired to work, and I thrive on doing work I love and being involved with organizations I believe in. I remember once interviewing the American conductor David Zinman at the end of a season, when he was completely exhausted by a brutal schedule of travel and concerts. He was apologetically limping through the interview but told me the moment he would start conducting the rehearsal that was about to begin, he would feel the music filling him up. I find music, and engaging with it in the ways I do, fills me up and makes me feel that I am doing what I was meant to be doing. For that there is boundless energy.

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Artist’s Statement

A free spirit and dramatic approach to art-making never ceases to make bold and risqué statements. Experimenting with concepts of power, protection, the unknown, and the subconscious, I explore relationships between the banal and the extraordinary. My work conveys ironies of widely held life experiences through the use of tangible materials.  

–Nicole Shimonek

Silicone Rubber Buckets

Nicole Shimonek
Silicone Rubber
8 in. x 8 in. x 12 in.
2010
In her accomplished first novel, American writer Jessica Penner takes Mennonite literature in an unexpected direction, infusing a story of a conservative Mennonite family in rural Kansas with folklore and magic. *Shaken in the Water* is a novel in stories, more fragmented and episodic than a novel, more cohesive in its themes and characters than a collection of stories. Many of the individual segments stand on their own but link to each other with multiple threads, so that the result is like a family tree, a collection of sometimes disparate parts that connect back to a common root.

The story begins with Agnes, born with a birthmark the midwife calls a “tiger scar,” which is said to foreshadow either greatness or tragedy. The birthmark is extraordinarily sensitive, so that Agnes can hardly stand to wear clothing. She often retreats to a deserted spot where she can run naked. That’s where she meets Nora, who becomes her friend and her only true love.

The account of their relationship, and of the beginning of Agnes’s marriage, is told in seven parts, two of which begin and end the book. What happens during that time reverberates in the stories of those connected with Agnes: her husband Peter, three of her children, two of her grandchildren, her daughter-in-law Ellen, and Ellen’s second husband.

Huldah, Agnes’s eldest child, is apparently carried away by a tornado on a clear winter day. She’s found naked, with her hair loose, and from then on refuses to wear the head covering dictated by community tradition. The church elders determine she must be shunned. Soon afterward, she hears “the Voice” for the first time, a commanding voice accompanied by a roar like a tiger’s.

Huldah is commonly thought to be a little fe’rekjt—crazy—but she’s not the only one to encounter the tiger voice. The tiger makes herself known to Huldah’s youngest brothers, Tobias and Johan, to Johan’s wife Ellen, and to his daughter Minerva. The tiger identifies herself as Nora, a connection fully explained only near the end of the book.

Nora says to Tobias, “Some people need a little more attention—attention God can’t spare.” In that sense, she’s like a saint in an old tale (another interesting departure for a Mennonite novel). She shows Huldah a way to protect her family when Englische men from town threaten her father. She gives Ellen the courage to defy her father and, later, her husband. To Tobias, however, she remains a voice, telling him he’s on his own. Johan doesn’t even hear words, only a growl. The reason, says Huldah, is that Johan is “tainted by anger. More than anger. Rage. I can see that. She can see that.”

Johan is infamous for his rage. Agnes feels it, too, and in their worst moments both she and Johan curse their own children. Their anger arises from a feeling they share with many characters in *Shaken*, a deep discontent with who they are and where life has taken them. That discontent leads to actions that show a kind of magical thinking: Peter shaves his entire body in an effort to make himself right with God; Johan frees a truckload of cattle destined for slaughter in an attempt to become a kind of Moses; Minerva kills a cat to bring her husband back to her.

None of these acts brings the intended result. What the characters gain, instead, is a small redemption, unsought and unappreciated. Peter and Minerva gain belated knowledge about their marriages. Johan meets and marries Ellen, who stays with him because of “her ability to hope he would become the man he tried and failed to be.”

Trouble and tragedy run through the stories like a red thread: untimely deaths, incest, cruelty, corrosive rivalry. But the colour red, a prominent motif throughout, also suggests defiance of restrictions, assertion of
sensual beauty, and the persistence of hope.

The book does have flaws. One instance of cruelty is inadequately explained and seems out of place. The red motif occasionally feels forced. And a couple of the shorter sections don’t contribute much to the overall narrative. As a whole, however, *Shaken* is an intricately structured narrative that rewards repeated readings. Magic doesn’t take away the characters’ troubles, but through the workings of story it underlines the significance of ordinary lives.

Joanne Epp is a Winnipeg poet and reviewer. Her first poetry collection will appear with Turnstone Press in 2015.

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Paraguay. The great savannah lands. A place of breathtaking splendour. But one must beware of that deceptive beauty . . . for Beauty is not without her Beast.

*Born of Courage*, written by poet Walfried Jansen, is a survival novel for young adult readers. The book takes as its central theme one of children’s most natural fears: the loss of a parent. For Tomas and Martin Brauer, the novel’s young protagonists, the loss of their father kick-starts the beginning of a desperate search. The two, equipped with nothing but the clothes on their backs, a machete, a lasso, two homemade spears, two bedrolls, a few knick-knacks scavenged from the burnt remains of their simple winter home, and their trusty dog Caesar, must avoid dangerous predators and find enough food to survive the hunt for their kidnapped father.

Eventually forced to abandon the search, the two boys turn their attention to building a livable hut and plotting more efficient methods of catching wild game. When life stabilizes again, they are able to resume their quest to find their father.

It is clear from the beginning that Jansen understands life in the wild. Martin and Tomas’s survival inventions are detailed and believable. At one point, they must prepare a meal of wild boar:

> Once at home they skinned out their trophy. They cut the meat into thin strips for drying in the sun. Drying the meat would keep it from spoiling in their sub-tropical climate. All the meat that didn’t lend itself for cutting into strips was portioned into bite-sized pieces and tossed into the pot for boiling. They cut two poles and then planted them out in the open by using the machete to dig holes deep enough to hold the poles upright. The lasso was attached to each pole and then Martin and Tomas draped the strips of meat over the lasso to dry in the sun.

In case the reader becomes confused with unfamiliar terminology, Jansen provides a glossary in the back of the book. The Brauer family members are German immigrants transplanted to a Spanish environment. Enough backstory, told in flashbacks while the boys are falling asleep each night, is provided between each adventure for the reader to gain a functional understanding of life in Paraguay.

Despite their effectiveness, Jansen’s descriptions of the boys’ survival efforts dominate the narrative. The urgency of their quest to find their father is quickly squelched by the urgency to find enough food each day. At times the reader might assume the father is completely forgotten; nothing is mentioned of him for nearly a hundred pages. Though it is fascinating to learn the different tricks one can employ to survive the Paraguayan wilderness, my attention lagged at the tedious sameness of the daily tasks.

Additionally, the novel’s so-called “villain,” Raul, a supposed “desperate man capable of murder,” rarely puts the protagonists in any true danger. Prejudiced and arrogant, with an unusual temperament toward “gringos,” Raul waves his gun around in a decidedly aggressive manner, but nothing else in his actions...
brings credence to his role as the villain.

Born of Courage is a fascinating read if all you're looking for is a wilderness survival adventure. It loosely falls into categories created by the far-superior classics The Call of the Wild by Jack London or Lord of the Flies by William Golding. Jansen never forgets the tender years of his protagonists, allowing them to speak true to their age bracket. The calibre of the writing, however, denotes its self-published status.

As a whole, Born of Courage leaves something to be desired. Despite the believable, detailed minutiae of Martin and Tomas's survival techniques in the wild, several of the novel's key plot points are unconvincing and its conclusion is unsatisfying. Readers are left with a light education on life in Paraguay and a few useful survival tips, should they ever be required.

Kerri Unruh is an aspiring fantasy fiction writer of Moberly Lake, BC. When her nose isn't buried in a book, her mind is in the clouds dreaming of dragons and adventure.


Reviewed by Edna Froese

It’s too easy to mock genre fiction such as romance, mystery, and westerns as mindless escape—“read one and you’ve read them all.” And it’s particularly easy when a sub-sub-genre becomes popular as suddenly as Amish romance fiction has: one new title in 2000, eighty-five new titles in 2012, with publishers encouraging new authors to “write Amish” (Weaver-Zercher). While formula fiction generally reinforces social assumptions, “bonnet books,” such as The Letters by Suzanne Woods Fisher, raise obvious uncomfortable questions of cultural appropriation and the commodification of the Amish.

Rose Schrock, protagonist by virtue of being the centre of wisdom and of many plot strands, is recently widowed. She has moved in with her mother-in-law, the sharp-tongued, querulous Mammi Vera, because a recession destroyed her husband’s investment business, bankrupted their family, and probably caused her husband’s likely suicide. Mammi Vera is Amish; Rose and her family, once Mennonite, have become Amish to please Vera. That would, presumably, forecast major conflicts, especially for Rose’s nineteen-year-old stepdaughter Bethany, who resisted the move and secretly trades her Amish clothing for fashionable dress when at work in a nearby sports bar. However, other than a dramatic rescue of Bethany from a drunken brawl, the clash between the Amish world and the “Englische” world provokes little serious discussion. There’s never any doubt that Amish simplicity and piety constitute the better way of living, which is epitomized in the story of Delia, Rose’s first bed-and-breakfast guest, who, though recently abandoned by her husband, finds comfort and healing through the Schrock family.

Characters remain two-dimensional despite, or because of, frequent unambiguous explanations of thoughts and motives. Their problems are real enough, yet the episodic nature of The Letters dictates that no conflict receives sustained attention. Even the opening dilemma—whether Rose’s daring dream of opening an inn will be quashed by Mammi Vera’s objections or the bishop’s opposition—is quickly resolved. Within two pages of Vera’s shouted “Absolutely not!” the basement suite is half renovated and the bishop’s approval freely given. Conflicts arise with all the frisson of danger associated with melodrama and then evaporate in the breath of prayer.

The Letters is typical of its genre: it contains a love interest (three, actually); suspense is built by bad fortune, poor choices, and multiple coincidences; at least one non-Amish character discovers Christian faith and at least one Amish character gains greater faith through Amish role models; and almost all plot lines are tidily resolved, leaving enough material
for sequels. Amish romance novels usually come in series, like long-running soap operas. In this case, *The Letters* is the first of a series; the second, *The Calling*, was published in January. There is a nice irony in the speed with which these novels on slow living are produced and published.

So what, aside from the comfort of a nostalgic, idyllic setting and self-induced suspense—readers know everything will turn out in the end, even if a miracle-working surgeon or discovery of secret Amish connections will be required—do Amish romance novels offer that explains their popularity?

Valerie Weaver-Zercher’s *Thrill of the Chaste* traces the beginnings of Amish fiction and its subsequent publishing history, and analyzes the social and religious contexts in which “bonnet books” have achieved success (mostly among white evangelical Christians). Weaver-Zercher’s most surprising conclusion is that these books function as iconic stories (never seen as realistic), intended to encourage readers to live more godly lives through examples such as Rose Schrock, who prays daily for guidance and humbly admits her failures. The real romance in these fictions is God’s courtship of individuals, both characters and readers. Another recommendation is that these books offer a “clean read,” a strong affirmation of chaste womanhood. Female characters may be entrepreneurs, independent-minded, and self-assured, yet nevertheless remain decently focused on their husbands and children. In *The Letters*, Rose can operate a bed and breakfast but she will still need the companionship and help of her single neighbour and the bishop’s assurance that the church community will take care of her debts for her. It is a deft feat: Rose can be appealingly strong, but only in ways that strengthen familiar womanly qualities.

Readers should note that *The Letters* does nothing unusual with its formula. It offers no surprises beyond dramatic plot twists, demands little interpretative effort, and reassures us that godliness and faith (not necessarily Amishness, however) will resolve all conflicts. The requisite devotional content is, to Fisher’s credit, perhaps more integral to both characters and plot lines than it was in two other Amish romances I have read (Beverly Lewis’s *The Shunning* and *The Judgment*). Nevertheless, if “bonnet books” are escapist literature, then it’s worth becoming aware of what we need escape from and what the form of that escape might reveal about us and our societal ills. *The Letters* will do nicely as that introduction. But follow it up with *Thrill of the Chaste*, which offers a more compelling narrative.

Edna Froese, PhD, recently retired from teaching English literature at St. Thomas More College at the University of Saskatchewan. She currently works as a freelance academic editor and continues her interest in Mennonite fiction and personal writing projects.


Reviewed by Elfrieda Neufeld Schroeder

At first glance, the title of Showalter’s book, with the word “blush” in pink letters above the face of a beautiful, young Mennonite girl, seems trite and kitschy. However, the author’s introduction soon changes that impression.

Showalter begins her introduction with a confession as to what her childhood home church (part of Lancaster Mennonite Conference) considered the “worst sin of all”—the sin of pride. She writes, “I’ve wrestled with the desire for greatness all my life, unable to give it up and yet unable to proclaim it boldly.” Later, she confesses, “contradictions in life cause people to blush.” As an unselfconscious child, Shirley did not blush, because her inner and outer worlds were in harmony with each other.

However, at birth, Shirley’s mother introduced a contradiction as to what her childhood home church (part of Lancaster Mennonite Conference) considered the “worst sin of all”—the sin of pride. She writes, “I’ve wrestled with the desire for greatness all my life, unable to give it up and yet unable to proclaim it boldly.” Later, she confesses, “contradictions in life cause people to blush.” As an unselfconscious child, Shirley did not blush, because her inner and outer worlds were in harmony with each other.

However, at birth, Shirley’s mother introduced a contradiction into her life by naming her after the child movie star Shirley Temple; this, even though the church her Mennonite farm family attended did not allow them to go to movies. A rude awakening
for Shirley occurred one Sunday morning a few years later while her mother was braiding her hair. Shirley’s mother told her that her father had noticed someone “proud” in church the previous Sunday. Shirley was horrified, because at church she had learned that God would destroy the proud. She was even more shocked when her mother whispered to her, “That person was you.” She came to the realization that “feeling great and looking like you enjoy yourself must be called ‘pride.’”

At school, unlike at church, Shirley had a chance to shine. Her biggest fear was that fellow students and teachers would judge her by her outward appearance once she donned the little white cap the girls in Lancaster County Mennonite churches were required to wear after their baptism. For this reason, she put off baptism. Showalter writes, “I spent my early years ricocheting between two poles: one of simplicity, humility, and obedience and another of complexity, ambition, and rebellion.” She finally gave up the struggle and said “yes” to God and the church. However, she “hadn’t yet given up the dream of becoming big.” In seventh grade, this meant winning first prize for her capon (a de-sexed rooster, as Shirley, blushing furiously, explained to her teacher) at a local 4-H Club competition.

Showalter begins her memoir with a chapter on each of her parents: her mother, who loved acting and writing, and her father, whose passion was farming and cars. In spite of their personal ambitions and desires, they followed the teaching of their church and succumbed to its rules. As a teenager, Showalter often challenged her father’s authority. As the oldest son, her father had his own battles to fight with his father, who told him he “wasn’t worth the salt in his soup.”

In Blush, Showalter portrays a different perspective, even as she struggles to reconcile the conservative lifestyle of her upbringing with the lure of the outside world. It is clear she feels she is worth the salt in her soup and more. However, Showalter never resorts to “tooting her own horn.” She does not hesitate to write about her childhood accomplishments, but does so with a sense of humour, drawing her readers into her struggles. She writes with honesty about her spiritual battles and the incongruities she notices in the leadership of the church, but at the same time gives credit to those spiritual mentors who gave themselves selflessly to their congregations.

Showalter’s readers can surmise that she tackles life’s challenges courageously. However, her memoir ends as she departs from her local community to enter college, leaving the reader hungering for more. Showalter’s later life achievements, such as becoming a wife, mother, professor, college president, and foundation executive, are not part of the memoir and she only mentions them in the epilogue. True to her spiritual upbringing, she writes, “As for becoming big? I’ve had a lot of what the glittering world calls success, and I am grateful for that. But I would not be my ancestors’ daughter if I didn’t know that ‘the grass withereth, the flower fadeth: but the word of our God shall stand for ever.’” Although deeply spiritual, Showalter’s memoir is a delight to read. It is never didactic, not even in her apologia at the very end, entitled “Why I am (Still!) a Mennonite.” Enhancing the reader’s enjoyment are additional features such as a map of where Showalter grew up, a family tree, many photographs, a glossary, and several pages of recipes for favourite foods she enjoyed as a child, including a list of the food prepared (for 175 men!) at a typical barn raising.

Elfrieda Neufeld Schroeder enjoys reading, writing, translating, and spending time with her grandchildren.
“The materiality of the writer’s life cannot be exaggerated. If you like metaphysics, throw pots.” – Annie Dillard, *The Writing Life*

As a social and cultural historian, I spend a great deal of time sifting through the archives, or the collected “stuff” of people’s lives. Why? Because occasionally, and much to the excitement of the researcher, these archives provide new windows into important historical events and help us to understand in nuanced ways the inner workings of global flows, time and space, politics and nature, as well as human action, resistance, and meaning-making. More often than not, however, these material remnants (letters, diaries, songs, children’s drawings, photographs, death certificates, notes, sewing patterns, newspaper clippings, weather reports, and poetry) offer humbling reminders that it is the dwelled-in “everyday,” the parochial and the domestic—not the political, social, or cultural “out there, somewhere”—which has provided individuals with the most meaningful, affective, and fecund ground for cultivating the mysteries and negotiations of their humanity throughout history.

With an attentive eye to the everyday, Melanie Dennis Unrau’s debut collection of poetry, *Happiness Threads: The Unborn Poems,* an exploration of one woman’s efforts to locate truth in the idea of a delicate balance between motherhood and artistry, offers this very same humble reminder.

This rich, five-part compilation is grounded in the beautiful, frustrating, humorous, ugly, joyful, harrowing, and ironic complexities of an urban mother and writer. And it is precisely this rootedness in the domestic that allows Dennis Unrau to engage the reader in clever, self-reflective explorations of identity built on the limits and lauds of contemporary feminism and motherhood, religion and family history, conception, birth, stillbirth, loss, love, the Internet, and partnership.

Lines from the book’s untitled opening poem, perhaps the best in the collection, strikingly summarize its juxtaposition of materiality and metaphysics:

my children are not my poetry so beautiful
they make their own

. . . . . . . . . .

it’s always work to be awake push back against routine stoop to play a child’s game while the laundry dishes i

. . . . . . . . . .
a mother’s job is to know what matters and keep it alive

a poet’s job is to feel for a pulse

so long as i’m living it is

Part one, “little bird,” continues to attend with honesty to daily life, with its focus on the lived bleakness of miscarriage and stillbirth. Here, the poem “miscarriage” and the sequence “unborn poems” stand out with their stark comparisons of the corporeal reality of the death of an unborn child, and the ethereal, haunting curiosity about what, if anything, can be made sense of spiritually in such a parting. These poems offer unadorned yet powerful images, like that of a robin’s nest grounded by young boys’ hockey sticks, and the bird then cupped in a little girl’s hands, alongside the mysticism of imagining a miscarried infant absorbing back into its mother’s body, its only chance at an act of love.

Parts two, “little pumpkin,” and three, “little guy” jointly muse on the strange, intimate wonders of conception and pregnancy, birth, mothering, and childhood. The most elegant poem in part two, “favour,” offers an intergenerational reflection of being mothered alongside a candid supplication for blessing amidst the chaos and judgment in mothering. The strongest of part three, the long poem “another birth story,” redirects the readers’ attention to the writer’s own experience of “birth”: an emergent womanhood, by way of the writing life, motherhood, sexual experi-
The fourth part, the title section, or “happiness threads,” is a bold, crafty series of poems written in the truncated style of an online, natural-mothering forum. This is the longest section of the collection. Though the abbreviations the author uses here are tiring despite the provided glossary, and though the section itself seems, with its sarcasm, to depart from the sentimental depth of the other parts, any feminist eye will pick up on and find meaning in the beauty of the ironic tone. Here, Dennis Unrau responds to and in the style of Internet conversation threads, which opens up space for the reader to consider the incongruous nature of official discourses about extended online community, happiness and contentment in motherhood, and the individual principles surrounding partnership, the body, and family.

The fifth and final part entangles the affective sundries that run throughout the collection, under the rather apt heading, “love poems.” This section wonderfully highlights the cultivation of self that comes from acts of love and loving: “alone I can feel myself all the way to the edges / one human distinct and fully grown / it’s love to veer back toward home,” writes Dennis Unrau, in the third section of “stride.”

This collection will appeal to women and men of all ages, parents or otherwise. It will conjure sights and sounds for those who are familiar with Winnipeg’s central Wolseley neighbourhood. While one of the collection’s underlying themes, motherhood, might dissuade those readers who cannot relate, upon closer inspection all will find significance in its questions of identity, love, and art in a contemporary world where public discourses of self-mastery and life-balance dictate.

Most importantly, readers will appreciate the collection’s groundedness in relationships, vocation, and the everyday, or its unification of the materiality and metaphysics within an equally austere and beautiful world. This everyday is a catalyst of love and becoming. Dennis Unrau’s collection emboldens us to remember.

Susie Fisher Stoesz is a PhD candidate in History at the University of Manitoba, an avid gardener, and sometimes poet. Her academic and creative work is centred on emotion among Mennonite migrants and their descendants.

“The stories people tell have a way of taking care of them,” writes Barry Lopez. “If stories come to you, care for them. And learn to give them away where they are needed. Sometimes a person needs a story more than food to stay alive.” Stories, retold from the past and lived consciously in the present, are the Wittenbergs’ salvation.

I share Sarah Klassen’s Froese ancestors, upon whom she bases her Russian Revolution scenes, but it was the storyline about the Wittenbergs’ genetic disorder that intrigued me most about this first novel. I have two brothers with Fragile X, a developmental delay that affects one in 4,000 boys and one in 6,000 girls but finds its way into few vocabularies and even fewer novels.

The Wittenbergs is a complex tale about GranMarie Wittenberg’s family: her son Joseph, his wife Millicent, and their daughters Alice (who’s just given birth to her second boy with Fragile X) and Mia; and to a lesser extent, GranMarie’s other son Phil and his wife Sue in Toronto (who also have a Fragile X-affected son). Klassen doesn’t shy away from touchy topics: extramarital affairs, addiction, depression, abortion, and dementia. Set in Winnipeg in 1990–91, the Wittenbergs’ unravelling takes place against the backdrop of Gulf War anxieties.

Optimistic Alice has left the Mennonite church for the more charismatic Church of Abundant Hope; she alone believes prayer will protect her from pain. In contrast, her mother Millicent has lived joylessly since her teens; she’s recently turned to the bottles in the basement. The reader feels some sym-
pathy but little admiration for Joseph, a high-school vice-principal driven by ambition and the selfish need to “buffer” himself against the sadness at home through an affair with the new English teacher.

Misunderstood by her sons, GranMarie, in her confusion and insight, her secrets and stories, is as engaging as Hagar Shipley and will stir readers’ empathy for Mennonite elders. Unlike Margaret Laurence’s famous protagonist, GranMarie graciously accepts weakness in herself and others. The connection GranMarie and granddaughter Mia share is remarkable.

The point of view shifts between GranMarie, Joseph, and Millicent but centres on thoughtful Mia. In her last year of high school, Mia faces crises in her family and school that challenge her sense of identity. Will the world “open up” and make a place for her?

Analytical, modest, and filled with longing, Mia is guarded with her parents, best friends, attractive Metis neighbour, and the troubled boy who depends on her. Rarely without a book in her hand or her thoughts, she’s conscious of writing her own story. Her response to bullies and betrayal reveals her courageous side. Mia doesn’t “leap” off the page; she slips inside the reader unobtrusively and will not leave.

As one might expect in a novel by a poet, descriptions are sensual and minimal, never flowery: the way a girl pulls her sheets up to her breasts; the way a woman lets in sunlight to warm a dead body. Poignant images, such as a harvest of dead leaves and a genetic text’s broken spine, fill the pages.

Characters refer to Fragile X as “curse” and “affliction”—a disturbing but authentic reflection of their Mennonite perfectionism and the less-sensitized 1990s setting. Parents reject, avoid, or try to fix their “flawed” children, and people in wheelchairs are resigned to being unemployable or unlovable. But Mia gets the final word on disabilities: at peace with whoever her own future children may be, she treats her nephews as people to be enjoyed. The children with Fragile X don’t appear often, except in the anxious thoughts of others, but whenever Alice’s toddler enters the scene with his repetitions and mispronunciations, he’s endearing.

Unfortunately, The Wittenbergs contains some inaccurate genetics. The family believes Taylor received Fragile X from the Wittenberg side, and they speculate Joseph and Phil inherited the pre-mutation from their father. But since men give sons the Y chromosome, it’s impossible for an X-linked condition to pass from father to son. This educated clan’s ignorance of something that affects them so profoundly decreases their credibility for readers familiar with genetics.

GranMarie’s story from Ukraine, told through Mia’s English project and drawn heavily from Klassen’s mother’s memories, is one of The Wittenbergs’s greatest strengths. Beginning with GranMarie’s grandfather’s search for land in Ukraine in the late nineteenth century and ending with her own passage to Canada on the SS Metagama, GranMarie retells her difficult history: the tsar’s murder, the flight of factory owners, typhus, bandits.

Tales of gypsies, “stones in the heart,” and camel’s-milk remedies have an almost mythical quality. Klassen fans will recognize images—the homemade stool, the cellar of potatoes, the cup of beaten egg at the sanatorium—from her poetry collection Journey to Yalta. A change in font makes these visits to the past easy to spot for those, like me, who want to encounter them over and over.

The in-laws who didn’t grow up Mennonite provide an outsider view of the Wittenbergs’ traditions, which include choral music, Mennonite church attendance, prayer, and a commitment to peacemaking. It’s not the German language or the piroshki that make English Millicent feel she’s on “alien ground,” but the Mennonites’ shared story—and the sad fact that no one asks for hers. Ironically, Millicent’s own renewal happens in a Mennonite thrift shop, and her family’s atonement amid the Soviet Union’s fall.

Despite Mia’s dreams and Alice’s prayers, hope for the Wittenbergs consists in small steps forward, not miracles or storybook endings.

The Wittenbergs may spur readers to ask questions about their own family histories. As Mia says, our stories are the best gifts we have to give.

Angeline Schellenberg is a Winnipeg poet whose work has appeared in Prairie Fire, CV2, The New Quarterly, The Society, Geez, the MB Herald, Wordgathering and Rhubarb.
Contributors

David Bergen has published seven novels and a collection of short stories. His novels have been short-listed for the IMPAC Dublin Literary Award and the Governor General’s Literary Award. In 2005, he won The Giller Prize for *The Time in Between*. He attempts to write five hundred words a day in a small office in the Exchange District in downtown Winnipeg.

Abigail Carl-Klassen grew up in the rural West Texas community of Seminole but has made her home on the U.S.-Mexico border for eleven years. Her work has appeared in *Geez*, *Rhubarb*, the *Journal of the Center for Mennonite Writing*, *Rio Grande Review*, *Blue Collar Review*, and *BorderSenses*. She recently received her MFA from the University of Texas at El Paso’s Bilingual Creative Writing Program. She lives with her husband Jonathan and teaches English and Creative Writing at El Paso Community College and the University of Texas at El Paso.

A gold medalist from the School of Art at the University of Manitoba, Debbie Danelley has been a full-time mixed media artist since 1997. She has had numerous solo and group exhibitions and is currently represented by Gurevich Fine Art, Fleet Galleries, and the Winnipeg Art Gallery’s rental galleries. She has completed private and public commissions, including installations at Victoria General Hospital and Deer Lodge Centre. She travels to Havana, Cuba annually, where she gives art workshops for children and artists in the Muraleando Community Project.

Colin Dodds grew up in Massachusetts and completed his education in New York City. He’s the author of several novels, including *The Last Bad Job* (CreateSpace), which the late Norman Mailer touted as showing “something that very few writers have; a species of inner talent that owes very little to other people.” His poetry has appeared in more than ninety publications and has been nominated for The Pushcart Prize. He lives in Brooklyn with his wife Samantha.

Jason Dyck works as an independent writer, researcher, and carpenter. He’s a graduate of the University of Manitoba with an MA in modern history. His research interests include historical theory, religious history, food security, and indigenous knowledge systems. Recently, he co-authored a work entitled “The Odyssey of Oral History Interviewing in Community-Based Action Research,” which is forthcoming in SAGE Publications’ Research Methods Cases collection.

Clint Enns is a video artist and filmmaker living in Toronto. His work deals primarily with moving images created with broken and/or outdated technologies. His work has shown both nationally and internationally at festivals, alternative spaces, and microcinemas. He has a master’s degree in mathematics from the University of Manitoba and recently received a master’s degree in cinema and media from York University. His writings and interviews have appeared in *Millennium Film Journal*, *Incite*, and *Spectacular Optical*.

Patrick Friesen has published a book of essays and more than a dozen books of poetry. He has also written several stage and radio plays and recorded two CDs of spoken word and improv music with Marilyn Lerner. His most recent books are *jumping in the asylum* (Quattro, 2011) and *a dark boat* (Anvil, 2012).

Emily Harnish is a 2013 graduate of Eastern Mennonite University. Originally from Strasburg, Pennsylvania, she is currently working at the National Institutes of Health in Bethesda, Maryland, a short metro ride from downtown Washington, DC.

Luann E. Hiebert is a PhD Candidate at the University of Manitoba, studying English Literature with a focus on Canadian prairie women poets. She is an adjunct faculty member at Providence University College in Otterburne, Manitoba. Recently, her poetry has appeared in *the Society* and *Rhubarb*. Her debut
poetry collection, *What Lies Behind* (Turnstone), is forthcoming this April.

**Joy Huebert** is a Victoria writer whose work has been published in many literary magazines, including *Grain, Other Voices,* and *Descant.* She has edited two story and poetry collections, *Magic Night* (Root Cellar) and *Pathways Not Posted* (Quadra). Joy was raised in the Mennonite village of North Kildonan, where she was saved and enjoyed listening to Plautdietsch and eating Lebkuchen.

**Julienne Isaacs** is a Winnipeg-based writer, editor, and reviewer. Her writing has appeared or is forthcoming in a variety of Canadian publications, including *Geez, The Winnipeg Review, The Globe and Mail,* and *Whether* magazine. She currently serves as Events Chair for the Manitoba Editors’ Association, and as *Rhubarb*'s book reviews editor.

**Kaitlyn Nafziger Jantzi** grew up between country and city and as an adult lived for a few years in rural South Sudan. She has returned to Ontario and lives in a medium-sized city with her husband. Kaitlyn’s writing has been published most recently in *Room* magazine.

**Patrina C. Jones** holds a PhD in English from Stony Brook University. She is a poet and essayist and resides in Brooklyn, New York.

**Ian Kent** has written and produced two children’s plays for the Edmonton International Fringe Theatre Festival: *The Kingship of NNNNorp!* and *Witches’ Brew: Carrot Stew.* While working in Mcleod Ganj, India in 2007, he was editor in chief of *CONTACT* magazine. His poems have been published in *Quills* and *The Prairie Journal.* He is of Mennonite, English, and Ukrainian heritage and currently attends a Mennonite Brethren church in Vancouver.

**Maurice Mierau**'s new book has the working title *Detachment: An Adoption Memoir,* and will appear with Freehand in September 2014. It deals with the adoption of his sons in Ukraine, his own struggle to attach to his newly configured family, and his father’s traumatic childhood fleeing from Soviet Ukraine in 1943.

**Corey Redekop**’s novel *Husk* was recently nominated for a 2013 ReLit Award. Now employed as librarian for the Office of the Attorney General in Fredericton, NB, he is somewhat hard at work on a new novel, when he isn’t distracted by shiny things.

**Nicole Shimonek** is a visual artist who holds a BFA Honours degree from the School of Art at University of Manitoba and an MFA from Chelsea College of Arts at the University of the Arts London. Nicole’s work has been included in a number of exhibitions and screenings, both nationally and internationally. Her notable exhibitions include work at the Winnipeg Art Gallery, Everson Museum of Art in New York, and Plug In Institute of Contemporary Art. Nicole grew up on a small farm north of Rosenfeld, Manitoba. Her grandmother, a Friesen, shared many Mennonite traditions with her.

**Mary Ellen Sullivan** grew up on a farm outside Guelph, Ontario and now lives in Halifax, Nova Scotia. Her poems and prose have been published in the *Canadian Journal of Occupational Therapy,* *The Leaf,* the *Canadian Messenger of the Sacred Heart,* and the anthology *A Quiet Bashful Man: Remembering Malcolm* (AB collector publishing). In 2012, she compiled *Open Heart Farming,* a grassroots collection of twenty farm- and food-centric poems by Nova Scotia poets. *Open Heart Farming: The Second Seeding* is this year’s sequel. She considers honour poems written for family and friends to be her greatest literary achievement.
The commonplace in the lives of ordinary people is what concerns Victor Carl Friesen in his new collection of fifteen short stories, *The Will to Live and Other Rural Tales* (Kingsley, 2013). “The Best Place to Be” is taken from this, his tenth book. The author, a former teacher, now lives in Rosthern, Saskatchewan. His academic writings include a critique of Thoreau; an award-winning collection of Mennonite folklore, *The Windmill Turning* (University of Alberta, 1988); and a history of the Saskatchewan Rivers.

Karen Yoder is completing her MA in English, with an emphasis in creative writing, this spring at Indiana University South Bend. She is working on a collection of poems as part of this degree. Her adviser is poet/professor David Dodd Lee. She has published poems in the *Journal of the Center for Mennonite Writing*.

Changming Yuan, seven-time Pushcart nominee and author of *Chansons of a Chinaman* (Leaf Garden, 2009) and *Landscaping* (Flutter, 2013), grew up in rural China but currently tutors in Vancouver, where he co-publishes *Poetry Pacific* with Allen Qing Yuan and operates Poetry Pacific Press. Yuan has a PhD in English and has recently been interviewed on World Poetry Café (CFRO 100.5 FM). His poetry has appeared in *The Best Canadian Poetry*, *The London Magazine*, and *The Threepenny Review*.

*Illustration by Murray Toews*
When I was told this issue’s theme, I hastily scribbled down my initial thoughts: “Note to self: Menno-themed Sex and the City knock-off for mag. Comedy!”

That didn’t work at all. Oddly enough, there’s very little humour in a herd of Mennonites arriving in the big city and proceeding to not do anything fun. As a concept, sure, hilarious as hell. As a full piece, it died on the page. A nasty, lingering, decidedly unfunny death. Now, if they were Hutterites . . .

Fact is, I have no idea what it might mean to be a Mennonite in a city, because I’ve never lived in a city. I have little basis for comparison. I’ve grown up with easy access to grocery stores and movie theatres and peoples of different beliefs and cultures.

Consequently, I’ve never taken a turn on the fun-house ride that elders tell me is the full Mennonite experience.

When I was a youngster and prone to believing everything adults told me, I heard rumours of a legendary place of enchantment known as Steinbach. My grandfather would spin tales of his life in the exotic realms of Altona and Morden and Winkler, yarns rife with sober ribaldry and Germanic hymns and rhythmic standing in place and God-fearing Mennonites as far as the eye could see.

I yearned to travel these fantastical lands and find fellowship among the hardy peasants who thrived there. Children like me, cruelly raised in secular societies teeming with liquor stores and public libraries, would quickly discover the truth; such Xanadus were utter falsehoods akin to telling young ones that Narnia is real, Oz is up north somewheres, and Middle-earth is just an airplane ride away.

I’m a city boy, no matter how many times I went raspberry picking with my Oma.

I resented not being in a city. I wanted, if not excitement, at least something to do that didn’t involve endless games of crokinole. You could argue I was more Mennonite when in Steinbach, but I was also way more bored. After a time, I became a card-carrying member of the lost tribe of Menno; citified boys and girls condemned to never comprehend the simple pleasures inherent in depriving ourselves of pleasure.

My flock does not fit in with Mennonites of old, so we wander about our impersonal cities, searching for . . . what? Meaning? Employment? Relationships? The glamour of living in a community big enough to have bike lanes? More varied choices in televised entertainment? After all, these are not the middle ages; man cannot live on rabbit-eared CBC alone.

Unlike my ancestors, I never grew up on, next to, or within walking distance of a farm. I never rubbed raw wheat in my hands, nor have I ever wanted to. Cows frighten me. Whereas my kin sweated and strained as they tilled the land with ploughshares, I mow the lawn and complain bitterly the whole time. Whereas they cultivated acres of vegetables to feed their families, I wonder why the tomato plants I purchased at the farmer’s market did so poorly this year.

Now, if I wanted to, I could abandon the city life and seek salvation back in the land where kielke is plentiful and the schmaunfat flows like chunky wine. But the thing is, I don’t view my heritage as my defining characteristic. There’s a solid baker’s dozen of attributes I’d offer as being more descriptive of my being.

Oh, I wield Mennonitism as a totem if people ask of my upbringing, but everything being equal I’m as equipped to offer an opinion on the Mennonite life as Rob Ford is to offer addiction counselling.

And I’m okay with that, because one of my defining characteristics is being a fellow who’s okay with that. Living in a city doesn’t deprive my life of significance any more than country living infuses a life with import; city living simply augments my existence with various electrical accoutrements.

I’m not a Mennonite in the city. I’m a person in the city. And for me, that’s enough.